

ROMANCE CAUGHT UP WITH SANDRA ON A CARIBBEAN ISLAND

MAYSIE GREIG

Pathway to Paradise



PATHWAY TO PARADISE

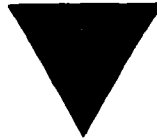
By

MAYSIE GREIG

TO most of the people on the little Caribbean island of Karpeti, Ashley Wood was a combination of remittance-man, drunkard and slacker, for England was at war and the fact didn't seem to trouble him in the slightest. June Martin could have told them a different story had she been a less discreet secretary. She knew that the island was infested with Nazi agents and that his secret job was counter-espionage and that his rather shabby diplomatic post was a cloak for work that was important enough to have had his persistent appeals for active military service refused by the Home Office.

When Sandra Redcliffe, daughter of one of the island's wealthiest planters was flown down to Karpeti by her fiancé, Peter Slade, they were forced to make a landing near Ashley's hideaway—a spot he was supposed to have provided himself with for rather reprehensible periodic relaxation—they took him for what he appeared to be, a rather impertinent beach-comber.

Sandra and Peter were to learn more about Ashley for themselves, however, and the story of romance and adventure that grew out of their better acquaintance provides extremely entertaining and exciting reading.



TRIANGLE BOOKS

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Pathway To Paradise

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Pathway To Paradise

Chapter 1

ONLY June and a few astute gentlemen in the Foreign Office at Whitehall knew there was another side to Ashley Wood's character. The world at large took him at his face value. First secretary at the British Legation at Karpeti, and a very bad first secretary since he was so seldom in his office, never likely to be anything more than a first secretary, everyone said. Not, they also said, that that seemed to worry Ashley. Nothing seemed to worry him so long as there were enough parties to go to, enough pretty girls to kiss, and enough drinks to keep going on. Quite fantastic stories circulated in the British and American circles at Karpeti as to the amount Ashley could drink. It was said that he could even drink the present President of the republic, André Longueville, under the table. Perhaps that was why, as June knew, he was the only member of any legation the President would listen to.

Karpeti was a black republic and quite one of the loveliest islands in the West Indies. It was really absurdly lovely, like a color film of some fairy-tale land, where all the flowers seemed to grow to twice their normal size and be of blatant coloring—orange, scarlet, red—where the high mountains that surrounded Princeville, the capital, in a semicircle were of a deep purple, and the sea at the foot of these mountains was of a deeper, richer blue than any Mediterranean sea. Karpeti had originally been settled by the French, but they had been driven out years ago by the natives. For a short space of time it had been under the protection of the United States, but some years before the war they had abandoned it, either through nobility or through despair, and now it was a minute but proud republic.

It was spring in Karpeti. Not that the seasons made very much difference to that tropical climate, yet the air always seemed a little clearer and fresher in spring and the coloring of the flowers gayer. June sat at her desk and looked through the window and felt suddenly desperately homesick for England, where the skies were probably leaden, the air damp and cold, and where, as likely as not, it was raining depressingly. But there was a war on in England. Bombs were falling on mansion house and small thatched cottage alike, on historical monument and grimy office building. It seemed incredible that England as she visualized it today and Karpeti were on the

same planet. If only she were over there doing something to help! She had been on the point of returning home so often, but she had never gone. Always she had managed to find some excuse. Yet of course the reason she hadn't gone was Ashley.

It was awful to know a man as well as she knew Ashley Wood, to love him so much, and to feel that she was really of so little account in his life. It was awful to have to listen to people running him down and not shriek out the truth. But she knew if she did he would never speak to her again. People not only said he was reckless, extravagant, dissolute; they also said, and quite often lately, why wasn't a young man like him at home fighting for his country instead of doing what was little better than a clerk's job here, a job which a considerably older man could have done as well?

Ashley himself had heard these rumors. After all, everyone heard everything in Karpeti, especially if it was to his disadvantage. He laughed and said quite loudly at cocktail parties: "Why the heck should I go off and risk my skin when I have a nice cushy job here, where there are no bombs or unpleasant things known as land mines? Do you realize that whisky in England is sixteen shillings a bottle, and the rum here is excellent and one can get a quart of it for three bob?"

Some people laughed; some were silent, and others quite openly looked down their noses.

Only June knew of that letter she had come across by accident up in his room the time he had had fever and she had nursed him. The letter was from some high-up gentleman in Whitehall to the effect that His Majesty's government regretted it could not accede to Mr. Ashley Wood's request that he be released from his present job so that he could come home in order to join up. His Majesty's government considered him much too useful in his present job, in fact indispensable, and the matter was closed.

No one seemed to connect the fact that whenever there were any serious disturbances in any part of the island, or when the enemy's agents were getting too active in the neighboring South American republic of San Marino, Ashley would take one of his periodic holidays which everyone said openly were nothing short of "binges."

June was thinking of some of these things on that spring afternoon. She was thinking, too, of the confidential report which had come to the embassy only that morning that a German submarine might be receiving supplies on the other side of the island. She wasn't altogether surprised when Ashley turned to her with a slight smile and said:

"I'm feeling the need of a short break, June, my angel. Too much work—of the liquid variety! I think I'll go over to my cabin for a few days, ruminate, and go native. Cursed nuisance about my car being laid up. I'll have to get old George

to take me, dump me there, and pick me up again."

"You could have my car," she suggested.

"And leave you carless for a whole week end? A week end in Princeville without a car is like being in Monte Carlo without the price of admittance to the Casino! How would you get to the golf club, the tennis club, the surf club, on Sunday morning for the customary bathe? That is almost a sacred rite in this dear community."

"I shouldn't care." Her voice was faintly on the defensive.

"But I should care for you, my sweet. My conscience would begin to prick me, and the less my conscience and I have to say to each other, the better!" As he spoke he moved away from the window and came and sat on one end of her desk, swinging a leg. "But you're a little dear to offer it all the same," he added more gently.

June's small hands clasped more tightly on the desk before her. She tilted her nicely shaped chin, and her gray eyes widened, showing the blue flecks in them. She caught her breath a moment before she said:

"Let me drive you there then."

There was a slight pause. "But, my love," he remonstrated, "you couldn't possibly get there and back in a day over these vile roads."

"I know. But"—she averted her eyes sharply—"need I get there and back in a day, Ashley?"

There was a moment before he replied. She

felt almost as though she were swaying dizzily on the edge of a precipice. She knew that her face was scarlet and she didn't dare look anywhere but straight ahead of her at the white wall. But she was *desperate*. She had loved Ashley so long—for two years, anyhow, since she had been working at the embassy. It couldn't go on. It was so painful she felt at times it must kill her. She had to make him wake up to her somehow. She had felt for some time now that if only he could get to know her in a different environment the miracle might happen. He was too used to her here. She was like a piece of furniture, to him. Like the dictaphone or the typewriter she worked on. Of course he didn't call *them* "my sweet," "my love," and "my angel." But she had heard him call old Susan who tidied his room all three of those endearments.

"Darling," he said lightly, narrowing his pale eyes and stroking his rather pointed chin, "you don't mean what you seem to mean by any chance, do you?"

The scarlet had crept from her cheeks down to her throat. There was something wrong with her eyes, as though they were full of sand suddenly. But she managed a certain defiance as she said: "And if I do?"

He clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth mockingly. "Sweetheart, you shock me!"

But somehow to have him make fun of her in that moment was altogether too much. She

sprang to her feet, knocking over the little table that stood beside her desk and spilling official-looking documents onto the floor. But she didn't stop to pick them up. She made for the door. She was almost through it when he caught her wrist and pulled her back into the room again. He stood looking down at her, his thin lips twisted, a half-smile that wasn't quite a smile on his rather ugly face that was so full of vitality.

"I might take almost any girl in the world up on what you said, but not you, June," he said quietly. "You see," he went on as she didn't speak—she couldn't have; her throat was too tight—"I like you so much. We're friends, I hope. I want us to remain friends, more than anything. And take it from me, you don't remain friends after that sort of thing. It either goes on into something else or it stops altogether."

"But supposing I—I—" But her courage was gone. She had never said such a thing in her life before. She had never thought she could have. But love does queer things to you, she had discovered. It could make you act as you had never dreamed yourself capable of acting.

"Darling," he said even more quietly, shaking her a little. "You know this is all nonsense. You're not that sort of girl at all. You're acting like someone in a bad film. You're a dear girl and, sweetheart, don't hate me for saying this, you're a *good* girl. And take it from me, it isn't dull or sticky to be a good girl even in these

jaded days. Now get your bonnet and shawl and drive me up to old Redcliffe's cocktail party. I'll be waiting outside in five minutes."

She stood quite still after he had gone. She felt like a small child who has been slapped. Gently but firmly slapped. She felt humiliated, yet she couldn't hate or even dislike him for it. She knew he was right. She hadn't it in her. For one wild moment she had thought—but now even her courage was like a balloon which had been pricked with a pin. She would have been miserable. "How depressing it is to be labeled 'good,' " she thought bitterly, "and to know in your heart that you are!"

Two tears of self-pity slid down her cheeks, but she brushed them away and then had to laugh a little at herself, for she had quite a good sense of humor. But love can at times interfere with even the best sense of humor. She picked up the official documents that were still scattered about the floor, got her bag off the desk, and walked over to the mirror at one side of the room.

"If only I were beautiful and seductive-looking," she thought, looking at herself in the mirror, "a *femme fatale*. He might have *implored* me to go then!"

June wasn't beautiful, but she was pretty. She had soft dark brown hair that curled nicely, a small tilted nose, a largish mouth that was so attractive when she smiled, big gray eyes with a few freckles under one of them. She was nicely

shaped and slim with quite lovely legs that had a deep golden tan on them. Yes, the reflection the mirror gave back to her should have satisfied anyone, but June felt she hated it. Once in every girl's life she longs to be superbly beautiful. June longed for it then.

Ashley was already seated in her small, rather dilapidated two-seater on which she had recklessly spent almost all her savings. It was parked on one side of the drive that curved in a semi-circle in front of the embassy—a large, low, white plaster house, half Spanish hacienda and half bungalow in design. Bougainvillea made splashes of scarlet against the walls. The sun was already low over the mountains, intensifying the purple shadows.

June said: "Would you like to drive?"

He slanted a smile at her. "No, darling. It's such fun watching you drive. I love to see you do the wrong thing in the most confident possible way. The noise you make changing gears is sweet music in mine ears, and the way you jam on your brakes all of a sudden has to be seen to be believed."

June laughed. The intense embarrassment she had felt a moment before was eased. She switched on the engine, put the car into gear, and drove it out through the embassy gates. Henri, the colored porter, touched his cap to them.

"I wonder who will be at Redcliffe's?" Ashley ruminated aloud.

"The usual crowd. After all, in a place like this there is only one crowd."

"Don't be so bitter, darling. Occasionally we are refreshed by a strange face when a big ship comes in. And talking of strange faces, how long do you think Mademoiselle Perrier is going to stay here as Redcliffe's guest?"

June wrinkled her nose, indicating a faint distaste.

"Until old Redcliffe kicks her out, I should say. I suppose it is thrilling having a beautiful refugee hounded almost unto death by the Nazis under one's roof. But methinks the lady tells her story almost too well. I've a suspicion she's worked it before. After all," she added, "it's as well he *did* invite her up to Plantation House. I hear she still owes her last hotel bill."

"Puss, puss," he teased. "Do you think she'll land Redcliffe?"

"He's at least twenty years older but, of course, he's a widower and filthily rich."

"True, my worldly one. Although all the money legally belongs to his daughter. That's a rum situation for you, isn't it? I wonder what it feels like for a man to have a daughter who controls the purse strings. She's one of the richest girls in America. Almost in the entire world, they say."

She nodded. "Rumor has it that the grandmother, having quarreled bitterly with her son,

left the entire fortune on her deathbed to his daughter. And the girl was to have absolute control of it when she was eighteen. That was last year." She gave a faint sigh. "I wonder what it feels like to be one of the richest girls in the world."

He screwed up his attractively ugly face in an expression of distaste. "I loathe rich women!"

"They say," she went on, "she's not only rich *but* brainy. She's just graduated from college with all sorts of honors."

His expression of distaste grew. "I loathe brainy women! Wealth and brains, how I should hate her!"

She laughed. "You must love me then!" And colored swiftly, wishing she hadn't said that today.

He said lightly, and she didn't know whether he said it to ease the sudden strained pause or not, "I do love you, June. I love you in the nicest possible way."

"And *I* loathe men who love girls in the nicest possible way!" she threw back at him before she could stop herself.

After that they were silent until she had turned her car in through the gates of Clifford Redcliffe's home.

The house, originally built in French colonial days and added to more recently, was an immense frame structure. It was painted white, like

most of the houses in Karpeti; it had an enormous porch where, at that moment, the guests were collected drinking cocktails or rum punches.

As they got out of the car Clifford Redcliffe disentangled himself from his guests and came out into the drive to meet them. He was an immense man, very tall and very fat. He had three chins and small, twinkling blue eyes. He radiated good humor, good spirits, good living. His chef was reputed to be the best in Karpeti, and he saw that the man lived up to his reputation.

"Hello, hello, *bello*, you two," he said, shaking a hand of each of them at the same time. "Here you are, just when you're wanted. At least just when *you're* wanted, old man." He thumped Ashley heartily between the shoulder blades. "Félicité, Mademoiselle Perrier, has been asking for you. She said," and here he did a very bad imitation of the attractive Frenchwoman with exaggerated gestures, "'And where is zat too, too ugly young man, Monsieur Ashley Wood? He has—oh la la, how do you Americans say it?—ze oomph!'" Here he thumped Ashley between the shoulder blades again, almost knocking him onto the driveway. "You dog! What hope have I when you are around here fascinating the ladies? Come along, I'll give you a drink, and then you can go over and do your stuff with Félicité."

June had disliked Félicité Perrier at their first meeting. She felt she almost hated her now. Yet she wasn't the only woman in Princeville who

thought Ashley had charm and said so openly. It was an odd situation, the young Frenchwoman here in Clifford Redcliffe's house. Of course Mr. Redcliffe was the most hospitable of men and would invite anyone to stay in his home. And Mrs. Labrun, the housekeeper, was, she supposed, a chaperon of sorts.

Mr. Redcliffe led them over to a largish table on one side of the porch where the drinks were laid out. He gave June a cocktail and helped Ashley to a rum and soda. As they stood there chatting and drinking a soft voice said:

"Ah, and 'ere *is* that most devastating young man. Whyfor are you hiding him from me, my Clifford?"

Félicité Perrier gave a small flutelike laugh as she joined the group, prettily tucking her arm through that of her host. He colored slightly, but he didn't look displeased.

"Look here, Félicité," he said, "what's the use of declaiming your passion for Wood here and making up to me at the same time? I'm not going to stand for it. I'm going to take Miss Martin off right away. Come along, my dear"—this was to June—"we'll go and see what that lazy rascal of a chef of mine has deigned to give us in the way of food."

Mademoiselle Perrier blew a kiss after him. "You are ze jealous old fool, Clifford." But somehow she managed to make it sound like an endearment.

As June and Mr. Redcliffe made their way through the open glass doors into the dining room he mopped his brow.

"What a gal! She keeps a man guessing all right. Attractive, isn't she? A good sport too."

June admitted the attraction but refrained from commenting upon the good sport, which she didn't believe. Felicité Perrier certainly was attractive with her minute frame, her dark olive skin, and hair that was so fair it was almost white. That she hadn't been born with hair that color scarcely mattered.

"She used to be in the Paris Follies," Mr. Redcliffe said. "But after the German occupation she managed to escape. Had to, poor gal. Some high-up brute of a Nazi was after her. Awful to think what a nice gal like that must have been through." His huge frame shuddered, and as if to console himself for what Mademoiselle Perrier had suffered he picked up a large plate of caviar patties and commenced devouring them. "Help yourself, help yourself," he said with his mouth full to June. "Don't stand upon ceremony."

He finished the plate and had commenced upon one of thin smoked-salmon sandwiches when he was called away. June left the dining room and wandered back onto the porch. Ashley was still talking to Felicité Perrier. Night had fallen swiftly, as it does in the tropics, and the porch lights had been lighted. One of them shone directly down upon him. She stood looking at

him while her heart felt tight and painful in her breast. Why should a man who wasn't in the least good-looking in the conventional sense be so attractive to women? she asked herself. It couldn't be just because he was so very tall and that when he smiled his whole face changed and seemed to slip sideways a little. Or that his eyes were so very light and one never knew quite what color they were. Or that he always seemed to be laughing in a way that made one feel he guessed one's inmost thoughts and was laughing at those too. Or that when he called one his absurd endearments he seemed to mean them—well, a little, anyhow. She turned sharply away. What was the use of keeping on looking at Ashley?

She found she had almost fallen against the broad chest of Sir Hugo Richards, the British minister, incidentally, her boss.

"Well, my dear, enjoying yourself?" Sir Hugo said benignly. He was a red-faced, elderly man of medium height, and he always talked to women as though he were Santa Claus at a children's party. He was vague and good-natured, and June knew that he was in his present post because he was really too stupid for a more important one. Karpeti hadn't really mattered until the war.

June said she was enjoying herself, and Sir Hugo said: "That's good. That's good, my dear. Would you like me to get you a drink or something to eat?" And then wandered off without

getting her either or even attempting to. She spoke to other people—you knew everyone in the English and American set. You met the same people at every party. At times June thought it would drive her mad. Always she would ask herself why she stayed on and always she would have to give herself the same answer.

She had come to Karpeti two and a half years ago as companion to Mrs. Trueman, an eccentric old Englishwoman who had a villa here. For a time June had thought she was in Paradise. The wonderful climate, the luscious flowers, the gay, carefree life. She was still in love with the place when her employer died suddenly. Her English executors offered June a month's salary and her ticket home. June took the passage money in cash and stayed on in Karpeti as confidential stenographer at the British Embassy.

The party broke up around eight o'clock. Most parties ended in Princeville around that hour to let people return home to their dinner. The dinner hour in Karpeti was eight-thirty. Ashley had just come up to June, smiled down at her, and said: "Well, my love, are you driving me or do I walk home?" when there was a slight commotion. Mr. Redcliffe was standing immediately behind them, and a moment before one of the native servants had handed him a cable. He slit it open and almost immediately started to splutter: "Well, I'll be blowed; I'll be danged; I'll be——"

"Not *bad* news, I 'ope, my Clifford?" Mademoiselle Perrier asked anxiously in her over-emphasized English.

"Not *bad*?" For once his good humor seemed shattered. "Not *bad*?" He was almost shouting. "I'll say it *is* bad. That gal of mine is coming out here right away!"

"What girl?" Mademoiselle Perrier asked in a startled voice.

"My daughter Sandra."

"Ah, your leetle *daughter*," the Frenchwoman murmured in a relieved voice. "But how *char-mante*! How I shall love to meet this leetle girl who has no mother, *pauvre chérie*."

Mr. Redcliffe looked at her. Almost he felt he was seeing her for the first time, seeing her not with his eyes, but with his daughter Sandra's eyes, and it wasn't a happy experience.

"Humph, ha." He cleared his throat. "Sandra isn't a little gal, Felicité. She's"—he gesticulated vaguely up in the air—"tall and, and——" His voice died away as though he were incapable of expressing what he meant.

"But the *pauvre chérie* is only nineteen, is she not?"

"Yes, but some American girls of nineteen are—are——" Again words seemed to fail him.

"How I shall love 'er," Mademoiselle Perrier was chanting. "I shall be 'er friend, but 'er wise friend, for I am a *leetle* bit older than she, *n'est-ce pas*? We shall have ze fun together, dances, bath-

ing. We shall not only be friends but confidantes. We shall——”

But suddenly, as though unable to stand any more, Mr. Redcliffe swung round and grabbed Ashley's arm. “Come along over and have a drink,” he said. “Phew, but I need it!”

Chapter 2

ASHLEY said to June as she was turning the car out of the drive: “What would you say to a spot of food up at Le Cabaret, my sweet?”

June said: “Yes, I'd love that,” before she remembered it would be better if she refused. Possibly the only way to cure herself of this love was to avoid seeing him. And wasn't dining with him alone up at Le Cabaret just asking for trouble? The atmosphere was incredibly romantic. So romantic, one felt, that it should have defeated its object, but it didn't. The restaurant was set high up in those hills which were deep purple in the daytime and were now silver under a glittering sickle of a moon. One sat out in the open under a shaded lamp and dined and saw, stretched below, the panorama of Princeville, with its twinkling lights like jewels on a dark woman's breast. One saw the sea, too, blue-black with silver foam. One heard the native orchestra

playing on twanging, unreal-sounding instruments. No, certainly tonight of all nights she shouldn't have gone with Ashley to Le Cabaret.

"Mr. Redcliffe seemed disturbed at the thought that his daughter was coming, didn't he?" she remarked.

Ashley grinned. He looked rather like a naughty small boy when he grinned like that.

"Disturbed is putting it mildly. From what he hinted while we were having that drink, this Sandra person is a regular tartar. It was she who insisted, it appears, that her father come out here and run the plantation. Before then he had employed a manager out here. But the girl insisted that her father 'do something worth while' instead of frittering away his life in food and good living. Lord alone knows what she'll think of Mademoiselle Perrier—and believe me, the dear little Frenchwoman is not going to be dislodged easily!"

June laughed. "I wonder how the daughter will like being '*pauvre chéried*' all the time!"

His grin widened. "Do her good anyhow. From all accounts she sounds a most detestable young person."

They danced presently. Herr Schmidt, the German minister, was on the floor with one of his fellow countrywomen. He was a thin, middle-aged man with a cruel mouth. Ashley and he bowed coldly to each other.

"I hate that man," June exclaimed explosively. "He ought to be interned!"

Ashley laughed at her. "You forget Karpeti is neutral—technically, at least."

"But the people are in sympathy with us."

"The people, yes, but the government is in sympathy with whoever doles out the most cash. Baksheesh, you know."

They finished dancing and went back to their table. From then on it was like any other night—almost. They both kept the conversation light, purposely so. Almost June could forget those few minutes in the embassy before they had gone to Redcliffe's party. She burned again with fresh mortification. What must Ashley think of her now?

He drove the car home. June lived at the Fleurie, the third best hotel in Princeville. There were only three. Though it called itself a hotel the Fleurie was a boardinghouse and, according to European standards, not a very high-class boardinghouse. But it was clean.

Ashley backed the car into the garage and then walked with her around to the front of the house. The broad porch steps were very white in the moonlight. At that hour no one else was about.

"Well, good night. Thanks for the dinner, Ashley." She turned sharply and was about to run up the steps.

He caught her arm. "I think I'd like to kiss you, June. May I?"

She gave a harsh little laugh. "Is this to make me feel better about—about everything, Ashley? You're trying to say: 'I may have had to turn you down, but you're not really unattractive, darling.'"

His grip on her arm tightened. For a moment he was almost hurting her. His voice was still light. "You're right. You're not unattractive, darling. Whoever suggested such a thing? You're rather *too* attractive for my peace of mind."

Her voice was still bitter, almost scathing now. She repeated his words of the afternoon. "That sounds like a line out of a bad film!"

"Well, does *this* seem like something out of a bad film?" He had her in his arms. The gesture was so unexpected she could only gasp a little. He kissed her lips. She felt she was drowning, but it was heaven too. Afterward he held her closely and said: "I wouldn't take you up on what you suggested this afternoon, but I might marry you, June. I might someday. I like you well enough to say that."

"But, Ashley, you don't love me," she whispered.

"Don't I? I'm not so sure. Which one of us knows when liking ends and love begins?"

"Oh, one does know, Ashley!" She had to be honest or try to be. "One knows. Have you—have you ever loved anyone?"

"No. Or rather I've never loved anyone more

than I love you, June. If I never meet anyone I love better . . . I'll be satisfied anyhow."

"But you might, Ashley."

He laughed a little. "If I do I'll let you know. But"—his voice thickened suddenly—"I pray not." He bent once more and kissed her right on the lips and then he left her.

Chapter 3

SANDRA REDCLIFFE and Peter Slade were sitting over dinner at the Stork Club in New York. It was pleasantly crowded; the orchestra was in fine form and the cooking excellent. Peter's plate was almost clean, but Sandra had merely toyed with her food. She was looking about her through her tortoise-shell glasses with interest, almost with amazement.

"Please, Sandra, don't look at these people as though they were animals behind bars in a zoo," Peter remonstrated gently. "They're not curiosities."

She turned her large blue eyes from contemplating the dancing floor back to him. "But I think they are, rather," she said seriously. "They *must* be freaks to enjoy this sort of thing. It's all such a waste of time."

Peter groaned inwardly. He had hoped for a

great deal from this visit—Sandra's first to a smart New York night club—but obviously his hopes were not going to be realized.

"But, darling"—the darling had slipped out, and Peter wasn't a young man given to endearments—"one must waste time sometimes. I mean one must relax. One can't spend all one's time working or studying."

"Of course not," Sandra agreed amiably, "but one can spend one's leisure in more worth-while pleasures. Discussion, listening to good music, gymnastics, skating."

"But dancing is exercise. Good exercise," he insisted.

"Do you think so?" She opened those amazing blue eyes even wider. "It looks more to me like licensed cuddling."

Peter looked and had to admit it did look, at times, a little like that. "But it really is fun," he insisted. "Wouldn't you like to try it, Sandra?"

She shook her head. "No, thank you. And now if you've finished do you mind if we go? When you suggested we come here I came because I really felt I should see a place like this once. But of course I knew what it would be like."

"And it is like what you thought?"

"Oh, exactly." She smiled across at him.

She had a lovely smile. But then everything about Sandra was lovely, he thought with a feeling akin to despair. Lovely and fascinating and

quite, quite absurd. All her ideas about life and about people were absurd, and yet she was so sweetly confident that she was right. Not dogmatically confident, just sweetly, reasonably confident. She knew everything about economics, or practically everything—she had just graduated with honors in that subject and in a great many other subjects as well—but about human nature she knew absolutely nothing. She put people in categories; she made no allowances for individual characteristics. Their characters were either very black or very white. A great deal of this was probably the fault of her upbringing. Because of her immense fortune she had been brought up in almost nunlike seclusion until she had gone to college. Even there all her companions had been especially picked for her. Her home life had been lived with an aunt who was herself still living in the Victorian era and who fed her imagination upon the romances of Ouida and Mrs. Henry Wood. She had imparted her ideas to Sandra, and possibly that is where the girl had got her odd conception of life. Yet strangely on some matters Sandra was most modern and practical. In her management of the huge fortune this was especially true. Even hardened businessmen had been known to look with admiration at this tall, slim, quite staggeringly beautiful girl, who was, after all, little more than a child, and defer to her judgment.

“I think I shall enjoy my visit to Karpeti,” she

remarked. "I have read that the living conditions of the natives are almost the lowest in the West Indies. I have written Father about it on several occasions, urging him to set up a model village for his workers. Once someone has shown the way, I feel confident that others will follow suit. I don't know whether Father has done anything about it. Father is apt to be a little"—she paused, and when she said the word she said it with deep affection—"irresponsible. I mean he fritters his time away with unworth-while things. But"—she smiled again, happily, confidently—"once I get out there I shall change all that."

Peter had no doubt but that she would. Yet, so curiously are we constructed, he loved her all the more because of it.

There was a little pause. Suddenly he leaned forward. He said: "Sandra, won't you take off your glasses for a few minutes?"

She looked at him in surprise. "But why?"

"I want to look at you."

"But—you can look at me just as well with my glasses on."

He shook his dark head. "No. To look at a woman with glasses on seems to me like looking at her through a glass window. A woman's soul, you know, is in her eyes. After all," he added, "you don't need to wear them."

"No," she admitted reluctantly, "I don't *need* to wear them except for study. But"—she frowned a little—"it's such a nuisance, always

He started. His broad, good-looking face flushed violently. He stammered: "Of course I am, Sandra."

She raised her eyes and asked without the faintest trace of coquetry: "Why, Peter?"

He groaned aloud. It was quite too much. He wanted to cry: "I love you because you're so beautiful and I'm a man. But I love you, too, because you're such a fool, a dear, adorable fool. You may be clever at economics and even at finance, but at life the dumbest shopgirl could run rings around you. I think you should know about life; all the same I want more than anything to protect you from knowing. You think you're sensible, reasonable, practical. You may be, but there is in you an immense zest for living, for loving. Oh, my darling, let me be the man!"

"Well"—she repeated the question a little louder because the band was playing a hot swing rhythm—"I asked you why you were in love with me, Peter."

He controlled himself with an effort and said what he thought she would want him to say—and despised himself for being such a hypocrite.

"We get along very well together. After all, we have much the same tastes, the same social background. We are even vaguely connected by marriage. We enjoy discussions, doing various sorts of sport. We—we—" He floundered a little, trying to think of something else to say.

"And we are both very rich," she interposed quietly.

"Yes, but I——" Again a flush rose to his forehead, and he fidgeted with a fork on the table. "I don't think that matters, do you?"

"Of course it does," she contradicted. "It matters very much. You see, I couldn't marry anyone who wasn't very rich. I should always be afraid he was an adventurer who wanted to marry me for my money. And"—she gave a faint sigh—"there are very few young men who are bachelors and as rich as I am—or nearly as rich. In fact, I don't know of anyone but you, Peter. And then," she went on as he didn't say anything, "I'm glad you love me for the things I want you to love me for. Because we are mentally attuned and respect each other. I don't believe in the other sort of love. I think it—well—to put it mildly—stupid. Respect is the main thing. You do respect me, don't you?"

He cleared his throat. He felt suddenly as though he had been plunged into waters too deep for him, and for once he didn't seem able to follow her reasoning. But he managed to say: "Naturally I respect you."

She gave a little contented sigh. "That's *good*. And in the circumstances I'm quite willing to marry you, Peter."

He literally gasped. It was more than he had ever dared hope for. He had dreamed of her saying those words often, but it had never seemed

possible he would actually hear them from her lips. Yet now he had heard them, instead of feeling the wild thrill of exultation he would have imagined, he felt curiously flat.

She asked a little anxiously: "You do want to marry me, or did I misunderstand you?"

"No, you didn't misunderstand me," he said slowly. "I do love you, Sandra, and I do want to marry you—but are you sure you want to marry me?"

"But"—once again her blue eyes opened wide—"haven't I just been telling you it's the most sensible thing? And of course I want to marry. It is the fulfillment of womanhood. No woman alone is complete. I want to have children too. Two boys and a girl."

He heard himself saying weakly: "But supposing it were two girls and a boy?"

She frowned. "It might be. Minor calculations do go wrong sometimes, I know. And now"—she smiled again at him—"since it's settled we're engaged, it's *quite* sensible that you should fly me down to Karpeti and do practical work in anthropology while I organize a model community for Father's plantation workers."

Chapter 4

IT WAS late afternoon. The sun's rays were already falling slantwise into the sea, but there was still sufficient heat in them to make lying out on the small palm-fringed beach a pleasurable sensation. At least Ashley found it so. After all, he felt he deserved a short relaxation. The past three days he had spent down on this remote part of the island had not been without incident. He had broken into an apparently disused warehouse beside a rotting jetty and found there a formidable supply of tinned foodstuffs and petrol. For two nights he had lain in the darkness beside that warehouse, and only last night had a native canoe come stealthily up to the landing stage, and in the darkness two men had got out, and one of these men had certainly not been a native. The expletives he used when he slipped and fell ankle deep into the water had a decidedly Teutonic ring.

The men went into the warehouse. Ashley crept closer, but as he tried to slip in through the faintly lighted doorway he heard a faint sound behind him. The next moment he was conscious of a burst of stars in his head, and then he knew nothing. When he came to the men were gone and the warehouse had been cleaned out so

completely he found it hard to believe there had ever been anything there. But he knew his eyes hadn't deceived him; it was clear that someone, somehow, in this remote corner of the island was organizing a supply base for an enemy ship. There was a possibility that what had occurred might prevent them from using this place again; on the other hand, they might not have been able to get a message through to whoever was acting for them here. If he hung about for a while he might find out something useful. Tonight he would go back to his post and watch.

He lay stretched out in front of his hut, a quaint little ramshackle affair which he had built himself after the native pattern. The walls were built out of wattle and daub, and it had a cane-thatched roof. There was a porch and one room in which he slept, cooked, and ate. And what a relief it was to slip away and rusticate here after the petty closeness of Princeville society! Ashley, who appeared in public the most sociable of men, in his heart loved solitude. He had never yet felt an urgent desire to share his solitude with any woman. He had had flirtations galore and not a few minor love affairs, but as for what is known as "the real thing" . . . Lying there, flat on his back, shading his eyes from the rays of the sinking sun, he was wondering if June was really the "real thing" in his life. What a darling she was! Honest, courageous, good fun, intelligent. Nice-looking too. Not spectacularly beautiful, but he

told himself he distrusted spectacularly beautiful women. He liked her so much too. Probably that was the best basis for love. Liking.

Did what he had said to her the other night commit him in any way? He didn't really know. He had spoken on an impulse. He didn't regret that impulse even now. He said he hoped he never met anyone he loved better than he loved her, and he was sincere in that.

Something was coming through the clouds like a great silver gull. He saw it at first when it was a long way off. "Hello," he thought, "if that's the mail plane it's a deuce of a long way off its route."

He saw, when it came closer, it couldn't be the mail plane. It was too small. A private plane. He raised himself on his elbow and looked up at it with increasing interest. Private planes which came to Karpeti were fairly rare. It swooped out of the clouds and began to descend rather rapidly. It was almost directly overhead when he heard by the sound of the engine that it was missing badly. He realized all at once the pilot was making for the strip of sand he was standing on. Either the pilot misjudged the distance or there was not room enough, but the plane hit the sand, overran the beach, and ended on its nose in a pile of rocks. He ran toward it, and as he ran he saw the occupants thrown out, like ludicrous disjointed toys a child throws carelessly from a window. The sand was soft, and a moment later

he saw the pilot struggle to his feet, but the passenger, attempting to rise, dropped back again to the sand. In the brief moment she was struggling up he realized that the passenger was a girl.

The pilot was already bending over her when Ashley stopped beside them.

"Sandra, darling Sandra, you're not seriously hurt?" the young man was asking, his voice hoarse with anxiety.

The girl replied in rather an annoyed voice: "Of course I'm not seriously hurt. It's only this stupid ankle of mine. It seems to crumble up when I try to stand on it. Oooh. . ." She made another effort, and her lovely face contorted with pain. "Oooh," she repeated, "it *does* hurt. I'm afraid I can't walk."

"Don't try," Peter said. "What cursed luck this is! I'll have to try and get hold of a car. In the meantime we've got to find somewhere for you to wait."

Ashley spoke from behind them. "Might I offer you the hospitality of my hut?"

They both turned round with a start. The sand had muffled his footsteps. For a long moment they stared at him as though they couldn't quite decide what to make of him. Certainly used as they were to American civilized clothing, Ashley made an unconventional picture. The abbreviated shorts he wore had become dirty and torn the night he was attacked in the warehouse; apart from those, he was naked, his body burned almost

a mahogany brown by the sun. His straight, light brown hair was disheveled. To Sandra he was rather an incredible-looking person until she remembered a story her aunt, Miss Welsham, had read to her about the son of a titled lord who had become a beachcomber. He had been sent out to the tropics as a remittance man, but the love of a pure and beautiful girl had finally shown him the error of his ways.

This, obviously, was a remittance man. Though whether he was the son of a titled lord or not Sandra had no means of knowing.

She looked at him with a keener interest for, because of her study of economics, she believed she was a student of human nature, good and evil.

She gave him a gracious smile and said kindly: "That is very nice of you, Mr.—er—er— I shall be most grateful."

Ashley felt, from her attitude, that it was King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid reversed. She couldn't have been more gracious had she been the Queen of England and he the meanest laborer. At first he was annoyed and then, remembering what he must look like, amusement superseded his annoyance. "And she's beautiful enough to get away with murder," was his mental comment.

The inevitable glasses had fallen from her face in the crash and been mercifully broken. The thick rope of flaxen hair had come loose and hung almost to her waist. Her face had been very white

a moment before, but now it was faintly flushed. Her blue eyes in that light were bluer than the sea itself.

Ashley bowed to her and said in a mock heroic manner: "Everything I have is at your disposal, madam. Might I offer you the support of my arm?"

Peter glanced at him quickly. What was the fellow getting at? Was he perhaps a little mental? He had read that living alone often gave people a queer manner of speech, and by the looks of this place it might be the ends of the earth.

"You *are* kind," Sandra said. "Of course I'd be pleased to have you help me."

"But there's no need, thanks all the same," Peter broke in roughly. "Is that your hut over there? I can easily carry Miss Redcliffe."

"Redcliffe?" Ashley caught up the name sharply. So this was Clifford Redcliffe's daughter, one of the richest girls in the world! The girl who was brainy as well as rich and of whom her father stood in almost mortal fear! Well, he wasn't surprised—except he hadn't expected her to be beautiful. She had that sweetly confident self-assured air that the possession of a large fortune gives a girl. It sets her apart from others, as though she were almost royalty.

Ashley, usually most tolerant of human failings, found himself resenting this attitude intensely. Who did the girl think she was? What,

after all, *was* the possession of so many dollars?

"Yes—Miss Redcliffe." Peter repeated the name as he picked Sandra up rather aggressively into his arms. "You may have heard of her father. Mr. Redcliffe has a plantation here."

Ashley murmured he had heard of him and added that this was, after all, quite a small island. Peter accepted this with a nod and proceeded with Sandra slowly along the sandy beach toward Ashley's hut.

He set her down on the porch in a faded deck chair.

"Perhaps you would let me look at your ankle? I could bandage it for you until you get to a doctor," Ashley said.

Peter gave him another suspicious look. "I'd do it for you, Sandra," he said unhappily, "but I haven't the least idea about first aid."

Ashley felt sorry for him. "One learns this sort of thing in the wilds." He added with an inward smile: "Besides, I had a Boy Scout's training."

"In England?" Sandra suggested, her theory of his being a remittance man gaining strength each moment. He nodded, and she remarked: "You must lead a very solitary life here, Mr.—er—er—"

"Most of us lead solitary existences one way or another," he commented and supplied his name, "Wood."

He knelt down and examined the ankle, dis-

covered it was not broken, merely sprained, bandaged it with a crepe bandage he kept in the cupboard. She thanked him profusely and announced it felt much, much better.

Meanwhile Peter had walked down the beach to have a look at his plane. He came back and reported that he thought it could be repaired without much difficulty.

"I'm afraid I don't know enough about mechanics to tackle it myself though," he said. "And anyhow, it is probably a several days' job. I'll have to get hold of a car and drive Miss Redcliffe into Princeville. About how far is it from here?"

"About a hundred miles," Ashley said. He added that the roads were appalling.

"Where's the nearest place I can get a car, or a car and a driver?" Peter asked.

"There is a village about fifteen miles down the main road. A native there named George has a car of sorts. He'll drive you into Princeville."

"But how are we to get in touch with him? Miss Redcliffe can't walk fifteen miles, or even one mile, with that ankle."

"You could get the car and bring it back for her," Ashley suggested.

"Yes, but— It will take me at least four or five hours." Peter thrust his hands into his pockets, his chin out, and scowled down at the worn matting on the floor. He didn't actually like to *say* he didn't trust Sandra alone with this man.

"I assure you my hospitality won't have worn

thin in the meantime," Ashley commented with a slight smile.

"No, no, of course not," Peter assured him hastily, a faint flush rising to his square, well-shaped brow. "All the same, I—I don't know the way. I suppose you couldn't be persuaded to fetch the car for us? I mean, of course, for a consideration. Supposing we said fifty dollars?"

Ashley smiled. It was rather a hard smile. In the circumstances he supposed it was natural enough for them to think he would be glad to pick up fifty dollars. After all, fifty dollars for a fifteen-mile walk was a most generous bribe. But the very fact that it was so generous made him angry. These people thought money would buy anything, that through it they could avoid all the minor annoyances and unpleasantnesses of life.

"I am sorry," he said, "but I am not able to go. As a matter of fact, I have an appointment here." And he had, or hoped he had, with whoever was taking supplies of tinned food and petrol to that warehouse.

Both Peter and Sandra looked surprised and faintly incredulous. They glanced at each other as though seeking an answer to the riddle.

Sandra suggested tentatively: "Perhaps a hundred dollars, Mr.—er—er—Wood?"

The hard smile on Ashley's thin face spread. It was even reflected in his eyes. "Not even a hundred dollars, Miss Redcliffe. As I said, I have an appointment here."

For the second time it crossed Peter's mind that the man might be mental. On the other hand, apart from his astounding refusal of a hundred dollars, he didn't seem to be.

"Then you'll have to go, Peter," Sandra said decisively. "I shall be quite all right here, and we must get into Princeville sometime tonight. After all, we can't sleep here."

Peter peered gloomily into the interior of the hut and admitted the wisdom of that remark. There was only one room.

"I suppose I will," he agreed reluctantly. "Unless, of course, we could find *some* means of persuading Mr. Wood?" He glanced up hopefully at Ashley again.

"I'm sorry, but I have an appointment," Ashley repeated firmly for the third time.

"Then you'll *have* to go, Peter," Sandra announced emphatically.

"In that case what about a bottle of beer to start you on your journey?" Ashley suggested hospitably. "I have one or two left over in my icebox."

"Your icebox!" they both exclaimed in startled voices.

He smiled, naturally this time. "My private icebox. Do you see that stream which runs into the sea? Well, a little further up is a tiny waterfall, and under that in a hole I keep my beautiful beer ice cold all day long. If you'll excuse me, I won't be more than a few minutes fetching it."

They excused him, Peter eagerly since he wanted to talk alone with Sandra. Ashley knew this, but the last thing he had intended was to eavesdrop. But it so happened that he couldn't avoid hearing the last part of their conversation. He came in the back way with the beer in order to get the glasses out of the cupboard. He thought they must have heard him—he was making plenty of noise—but apparently they hadn't, for after what must have been a pause Peter said: "Candidly, Sandra, I don't like the idea of leaving you with this Wood fellow at all. He seems very odd to me. I can't place him."

"Can't you?" Sandra's voice was faintly superior. "He seems fairly obvious to *me*, Peter. He's what is known as a remittance man. Their fathers send them out to the colonies or to the tropics because they've made things a little too uncomfortable for their parents in England. They are paid to keep away from the country, as it were."

"But this fellow seems a gentleman."

"Of course. They always *are* gentlemen's sons. There was a lot about them in those books Aunt used to read to me. It's most interesting to meet one in the flesh. I shall encourage him to talk about himself while you're fetching the car."

"Hang it all, Sandra, how do I know he's to be trusted alone with you?" Peter burst out explosively.

She appeared to consider that seriously, for there was a slight pause before she said: "I see

what you mean, Peter. Of course there is no means of knowing whether or not he is to be trusted, is there? Possibly he isn't. He may not have seen a white woman for months, even years. It's probably expecting a little too much of him that he—well, that he shouldn't try to take advantage of your absence. All the same, you needn't worry. I assure you I am capable of taking care of myself. Oh, quite capable. What modern intelligent girl isn't?" She sounded so confident that Peter said uneasily:

"Well, if you *are* sure But I hate doing it, darling!"

Ashley was smiling again. This time he was smiling in quite a different way. He wasn't at all sorry he had overheard them. He had felt in the beginning he couldn't have disclosed himself without causing them intense embarrassment, and then afterward he had been too intrigued and amused. A sardonic smile twisted his thin lips. He decided it was going to be interesting spending five hours alone with Miss Redcliffe. He must try not to disappoint her.

Chapter 5

BOTH Sandra and Peter started rather obviously when Ashley stepped out onto the porch. An

uneasy look fled between them, as much as to say: "He can't possibly have heard?" But when Ashley said heartily: "I'm sorry I've been such a deuce of a time," they looked reassured.

"Darned nice of you to have troubled," Peter said.

"Oh, it hasn't been any trouble. Besides, I can do with a drink myself."

He had brought out two glasses, one for Peter and one for himself. A girl like Sandra Redcliffe, the *rich* Miss Sandra Redcliffe, wouldn't drink beer. Champagne or—he looked at her again, at her sweetly serious unsmiling face—and decided that tea was possibly her favorite beverage. But when out of formality he suggested she might care to join them she said yes, she would take some, but a very little, please.

He was so astounded he said: "You *like* beer, Miss Redcliffe?"

"No, I don't really like it," she replied, frowning slightly. "But of all alcoholic beverages I understand it to be the least harmful. Also the nutriment value is quite high. I don't believe in overindulgence in alcohol; on the other hand, I don't believe in total abstinence either. One does need a mild stimulant sometimes, I think. That's why occasionally I drink a glass of beer."

"Oh—er—I see," Ashley said. For once he found himself completely at a loss for words with a woman.

Peter smiled. Somehow after that speech he

felt happier about going away and leaving her alone with Ashley.

They drank the beer almost in complete silence. The sun had fallen almost into the sea. It looked like a golden bowl on a blue canvas.

"It's a pity you'll have to walk most of the way in the dark, Peter, but it will be cooler," Sandra broke the silence to remark.

"Cooler be damned!" Peter exclaimed irritably. "I'll be lucky if I don't lose my way."

"You could take a compass," she suggested.

"I haven't one."

"Perhaps Mr.—er—Wood has one?"

Ashley shook his head. "Sorry, but I haven't. I haven't needed one up to date. You see, I know my way rather well about these parts."

"In that case I really think you might—" Peter began aggrievedly when she silenced him.

"Hush, Peter. Mr. Wood has made it quite plain that he cannot go because of a previous appointment."

Peter looked his incredulity but kept silent. Ashley smiled inwardly and kept silent too. Sandra was looking about her with interested eyes. "It really *is* heavenly here." She sighed. "I don't blame you for making your home here, Mr.—er—Wood. I've read so much about the tropics. It's interesting, actually seeing them."

"Well," Peter said, standing up, "if I don't get going in the direction of that car *you* will be making your home here, and in this very spot. I

suppose"—he turned toward Ashley—"you'll be able to give her something to eat?"

"If she'll allow me I shall cook a dinner especially in her honor," Ashley said. He bowed toward Sandra. He might have been a courtier instead of a very disreputable-looking beachcomber, Peter thought, frowning, and again had doubts as to his sanity. It would be ghastly, he reflected, if he were leaving Sandra here alone with a madman!

"I shall enjoy that," Sandra said. "Or perhaps you would like me to help you prepare the dinner?"

"Oh, dear, no," Ashley said. "It shall be my privilege to cook for you and to wait upon you tonight. Incidentally"—he was frankly curious—"can you cook?"

"Of course," she said scornfully. "I majored in domestic sciences as well as in economics. Cooking is as much of an art as painting and as necessary as engineering. I have no patience with women who can't cook or who profess to despise it."

"Neither have I," Ashley said. He looked at her for a moment almost with respect.

Peter tightened his belt and reflected a little wryly that despite all this talk about food neither of them seemed the least concerned how he was going to eat that night. But Sandra—bless her, despite all her high-sounding talk—was beautifully impractical. Yet as far as he was concerned

her numerous inconsistencies only increased her lovability.

He bent and kissed her lips before he left, a gesture that seemed to take her rather by surprise, for except for one kiss that night she had decided upon their engagement he hadn't kissed her. He didn't really know why he hadn't kissed her since; he told himself he was saving them up; kisses would be all the sweeter after their marriage. He didn't like to believe he didn't want to feel again that faint sense of disappointment he had experienced after that one kiss. Her lips had been very sweet. She had even responded in a measure. All the same he had felt a little flat afterward, and it wasn't a happy feeling.

But just now he kissed her with a purpose. He was demonstrating to Ashley that she was his and that he, Ashley, had better be careful. Ashley knew this, too, and the faint smile on his thin lips was reflected in his pale eyes.

Sandra watched Peter go until he was hidden from view by the palm trees and the shrubs. She sighed. "I suppose it's going to be a lonely walk for him; but for this ankle of mine I could have gone with him. I enjoy walking."

"But if you had gone, think of the pleasure that would have been denied me," Ashley remarked pointedly.

"It is very kind of you to feel that way," she said sweetly.

"Not kind at all. Imagine the warmth, the

beauty, the color this brief acquaintance with you is going to bring into my bleak life, Miss Redcliffe. Can you imagine what it means to me, a man starved for human society—especially feminine society—to have you here in my cabin for five whole hours?”

For the first time she looked faintly troubled, almost suspicious. Ashley decided he mustn't overdo it.

She murmured again: “It's nice of you to feel like that,” and added: “I hope I'm not going to be a nuisance to you.”

“Far from being a nuisance, it's going to be one of the greatest pleasures I have ever experienced. But”—he smiled—“we could go on talking like this in circles for hours, couldn't we?”

She smiled too. He caught his breath; it was such a lovely smile. The beautifully shaped mouth became soft, almost childlike; the deep blue eyes crinkled, and the faintly tilted nose became even more tilted.

“I'm glad you're human,” she said.

“Human?” He was startled. Oddly he had been thinking much the same thing about her.

“Why, yes. Still able to joke about things. I should think that living alone like this, year in and year out, would make one——” She hesitated as though at a loss for the word to express what she did mean.

“Introspective?” he suggested. “Too wrapped up in oneself to be human?”

"Yes, rather like that. And—and primitive."

He said slowly, looking at her, "Perhaps I have become rather primitive."

He saw the flush that mounted to her low broad brow. He glimpsed for a moment an expression, not fear, but certainly apprehension, in her eyes. He suppressed a smile and went on: "A man does become primitive living as I've been living. Small things, subtleties, ordinary conventions, cease to interest him. He becomes absorbed by his essential needs—thirst, hunger"—he brought out his next words with a fine effect—"a man's desire for a woman."

She didn't gasp. But only by an effort at self-control she didn't. She had determined whatever he said—or did—she wouldn't be put off her course. Certainly she wouldn't be afraid. She had expected something like this—only perhaps she hadn't expected it to come quite so quickly. But after the first sense of shock she felt glad it had come. She knew where she stood and she had time to marshal all her intellectual forces to ward off the attack. She was determined that this encounter should have a salutary effect upon him. She even admitted, in a way, she was enjoying it. She felt definitely she was rubbing shoulders with life.

"Yes, I can understand that," she replied in what she believed to be a perfectly controlled voice. "A man does need a woman, just as a

woman needs a man. That's why I decided to marry Peter."

"You're going to marry that fellow?"

"Yes. We like each other, respect each other, have tastes in common. We both come from"—she hesitated a moment—"the same set."

"It sounds as though it were going to be one hell of a marriage."

She looked startled. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

He laughed. "Most marriages which have so much to recommend them go off the rails completely. I even think it's safer to marry someone you thoroughly dislike."

She frowned. "That doesn't sound sensible."

"Is anything in life sensible? Anything that has to do with one's emotions, I mean. You may be able to lay down rules for mathematics, but certainly you can't lay down rules for life—or for love. But were we talking of love? If I remember rightly, in that depressing list of affinities you share with your fiancé you didn't mention love. Perhaps you overlooked it."

She found suddenly she didn't know how to answer that. It left her queerly disconcerted. Yet since she prided herself upon her mental honesty she tried to face it.

"Aren't love and respect synonymous?" she suggested.

He laughed again, and this time she didn't quite

like the way he laughed. "Far from it! Love, from my experience, is a unique emotion and has no relation to any other. Certainly not to respect nor, sometimes, to liking."

"But that is nonsense," she said in her sweetly reasonable voice. "Love—at least the sort of love that leads to marriage—must have a more solid foundation than—than——"

"Merely wanting to get into bed with a man?" he suggested impudently.

This time he did shake her. She flushed quite brilliantly. He thought: "She's even more beautiful when she's flushed. Darn it all, this would be a much safer conversation for all concerned if she weren't so lovely!"

"Well, yes," she said hesitantly, "I suppose that is what I did mean. Only——"

"You wouldn't have put it so bluntly? Or perhaps you've never thought of marriage in that light."

Her color, if possible, rose even higher. She said in rather a tight voice: "Need one think about it in that light?"

"That," he thought, "is a question I've been asking myself for the past three days, confound it!"

"I don't know," he said slowly. "I suppose if one never fell in love with anyone else in that way it wouldn't matter very much."

A faint sigh escaped her. It sounded like relief.

"And of course one wouldn't fall in love with anyone else in that way after one married. One wouldn't let oneself."

He raised one eyebrow slightly. "Are you so sure you'd always be in such complete control of your emotions?"

"Of course. If one has intelligence one *is* in control of one's emotions."

"You're certainly a young lady who knows all the answers," he said and grinned at her.

She noticed the way his face slipped sideways when he smiled, and she found herself wondering what it was about him that was so attractive when he wasn't good-looking at all. Peter was good-looking. Clean-cut features, well-poised head, honest, sober eyes, nicely made body. The sort of young man any girl is proud to be seen about with. She was even ready to admit that his fine appearance had entered into her calculations when she had suggested their marriage. But when he wasn't smiling one could only describe Ashley as ugly, with his long, thin face, his colorless eyebrows, his pale eyes. He was almost too tall; yet, looking at his bare torso that was a copper shade in the half-light, she couldn't help thinking that he looked in very good condition, and when he moved one could see the muscles rippling under the surface of his skin.

He felt her eyes upon him, and his grin widened. "I suppose I'd better get dressed up for dinner since I'm entertaining a lady."

She withdrew her eyes from him quickly, almost guiltily.

He went inside and a few moments later he was back again, tucking a worn tennis shirt into the top of his shorts. "There"—he smiled—"quite the respectable little gent when I'm clothed, aren't I?"

She smiled too. "I can't say that's exactly a conventional dinner suit."

"No? Sorry, but I left my tails at home."

"You mean at home in England?"

"You guessed I was English?"

"Of course!" She sounded faintly scornful.

"My accent, I take it?"

"That—and other things."

He sat down again on the corner of the porch, winding his long arms about his bare knees. "I should be interested to know what those other things are. You can tell me while we're waiting for the kettle to boil. By the way, I'm afraid you'll have to have dinner tonight out of a tin. I didn't catch any fish. Heaven alone knows what I'd do without Mr. Heinz and all his varieties!"

"No one should rely too much upon tinned food," she pointed out. "It is not only a lazy habit, but the calorific value of tinned food is never so high."

He sank his chin down onto his knees. "But what made you think I wasn't lazy?"

"Oh—er"—she appeared a little flustered—"are you?"

"Shockingly, deplorably lazy," he said with satisfaction. "I have never *willingly* done a day's work."

"Is that why you were sent out from England?" she heard herself ask and wished she hadn't. He was her host, and despite her curiosity it was scarcely tactful.

His head jerked up. For a moment he looked surprised, then his pale eyes narrowed. His lips twitched once before he said:

"I see you know all about it."

"Well, I didn't know; I only guessed. You see"—she was stammering a little—"I've read a great deal about men like you."

"That must have been enlightening."

"Oh, it was. And I——" She paused.

"You sympathize with men like me, I hope?"

"No, I don't sympathize. But I think I *can* understand a little how such things happen. At least I try to. One should always try and see the other person's point of view, shouldn't one?"

"But you couldn't imagine yourself in like circumstances?"

"Oh no! If one realizes the important work each of us has to do in this world and if one keeps one's mind upon interesting, serious things, one isn't tempted—I mean"—she was stammering again—"one isn't so foolish as to throw aside one's

opportunities of making a decent place in the world."

"You don't think you'd be tempted to step off the straight-and-narrow path, as it were? You wouldn't ever yield to a sudden temptation, perhaps even a primitive temptation?"

"I—I don't think I should." But she sounded a little less confident all of a sudden. For the first time in her life it occurred to her that just probably there were circumstances when she *might*. . . .

He sighed. "You're lucky to be so sure of yourself. There have been occasions in my life when I haven't been sure of myself at all."

"I suppose it was on one of those occasions," she began again and altered it to: "I suppose what you did wasn't so very wicked. I mean"—her face colored—"it wouldn't be considered so wicked now."

"Good heavens," he exclaimed, "how old do you take me for?"

"Of course you're not old! But—it must have happened some years ago. How long *have* you been out here?"

"Six years," he said. "It seems like six centuries."

"If only they'd let me get home, blast them," he thought. "But each time I get a smell of leave some fresh trouble blows up. They won't even let me go home to join up."

One trouble was that Ashley was fluent not

only with the native language, but with all the dialects. Also, he had been brought up out here as a child, his father having been British consul. In the present crisis his knowledge of the islanders made him indispensable.

She nodded her quite lovely head. "Yes, I should think it would seem like that. Forgive me, but I could imagine nothing worse than being an outlaw from one's home. I suppose there is no hope of effecting a reconciliation with your father. Forgive me, *is* it your father? Perhaps if you went home now and offered to fight for your country he might relent."

After a short pause during which he recovered from a fresh astonishment he said: "It's a-long way, and the trip costs a lot of money."

"I see," she said quietly.

They were silent for a while.

It was dark now, a smoky darkness; one could see the sea and the outline of the waves and the shapes of the palm trees. He could dimly see the line of her profile and the blurred whiteness of her hands which were clasped in her lap. He got to his feet, came over to her, and took one of those hands. "Come along inside. I'll light the lamp and we'll have dinner. But first you may want to tidy yourself, so I'll go along to my ice-box and collect another bottle or two of beer. Can you walk on that ankle?"

She found she could just hobble. While he was gone she sat before a minute mirror in his cabin

and rewound the heavy ropes of hair that encircled her head. She looked about her with interest. The interior was primitively furnished but not at all squalid. She had expected to find it dirty, the bed unmade, beer bottles stacked in corners. At least that was how the interiors of beachcombers' huts she had read about looked. She had had, for a moment, a fleeting vision of herself tidying it up so that when he returned he would gasp with delight and realize what a woman's touch could do. But this interior was almost depressingly neat and clean.

He cooked the dinner in a small shed outside the back door of the cabin. They had tomato soup, canned chicken, and canned vegetable salad. Had Sandra thought about it, she might have thought it strange for a genuine beachcomber to be able to afford such affluent fare. But such was her disregard for material things that she was able to eat it without thinking. As a millionairess she had become so used to personal luxury, it had lost all meaning for her.

But she complimented him upon the dinner and added politely that he was a very good cook.

"All I did was to heat the soup," he informed her and added, smiling: "Are you always so lavish with your praise?"

"When it's merited," she said, but she felt a little foolish suddenly, and it was a new experience for her.

He had laid a colorful native counterpane over

the bed and afterward he invited her to sit upon it while she drank her coffee. The darkness outside had thickened; though the porch doors were open it seemed to close them into the room like a wall. While Ashley moved about in the lamp-light, taking the plates and dishes off the table and stacking them outside in the shed, she watched him. She was conscious of a sense of apprehension, but oddly it wasn't an unpleasant feeling. But she knew very definitely that she was here alone with him, in this small one-roomed hut, and that the wall of darkness outside was solid, that they were miles away from any other human being, that the only help she could rely upon or expect lay within herself.

Yet oddly it was she who started the conversation on its dangerous course. "Why did you lie to Peter about having an appointment?"

"You think I lied?"

"Yes. With whom could you have an appointment here? There isn't anyone."

"I admit that sounds reasonable."

"Then you did lie?"

"I haven't said I did. . . . But if you thought I was lying why didn't you insist upon your young man staying with you?"

She felt herself flushing and was annoyed that she should, for she had quite a reasonable answer.

"I—I wanted to talk to you."

She felt his smile, knew it was a mocking smile, and resented it.

"You mean you wanted to have a stab at reforming me?" he asked.

"Yes—no, of course not! But"—she strengthened her voice—"it does seem a pity that a man like you should be wasting his life. I'm sorry. I know I have no right to say this."

"No," he agreed pleasantly, "no earthly right. All the same it's interesting. Just what do you think I should do with my life?"

"Not fritter it away! There is work in this world for everyone and especially now that your country is at war——"

He broke in curtly. "Please don't keep harping upon that! It's the second time you've mentioned that my country is at war!"

"I'm sorry. No, I'm not. If you feel that way, if you're *really* beginning to feel that way——"

"Blast it all, don't you think I'm *human*? What do you think it feels like, rotting away in this stifling hothouse of an island, knowing that over in your own country men are fighting and dying, knowing that the places you've grown up in, have loved, are being ruthlessly bombed? My old school was blown to bits the other day. Don't you realize that being forced to remain out here in this—this horrible inaction is like a cancer gnawing at a man's vitals? Hasn't it entered that lovely but quite stupid head of yours——" But suddenly he paused. What on earth had got into him? This was how he felt, but never had he breathed a word of it before, not even to June,

His line was "blast the hell to Europe," a complete cynicism. Why had he blurted this out to this girl? Was it because somehow she had got under his skin?

She was breathing quickly, her blue eyes shining. For a moment her face looked transfigured. She didn't seem to resent his imputing to her head the adjective "stupid," either.

"I was *sure* you felt that way at heart! Now I feel that everything has been justified. Even that it all may have been a prearranged plan. Our crashing on this beach, my spraining my ankle, Peter going off in search of a car. . . . You just needed someone to talk to you. Perhaps in a very inferior way to show you." She laid a hand upon his bare arm. "Don't be angry with me, please, but I *am* so happy!"

But he was angry. All of a sudden he was very angry indeed. For a moment his anger was more real than his sense of the humor of the situation. That this blasted girl should believe that *she* could be instrumental in showing any decent Englishman where his duty lay! The conceit of the female!

He rose to his feet and walked across to the bureau while he got control of his temper. When he turned back toward her he was no longer so angry, yet the gentler feeling he had had for her for some little time now was gone.

"Supposing we stop talking about me for a while?" he suggested. "Tell me something about

yourself. It isn't often one meets a genuine millionairess in the flesh."

He saw her face color. "Oh—you know?"

"I think I remarked before that this island was small. Everyone knows your father, or of him."

"Poor Daddy," she sighed, "he has a very hard life, I'm afraid."

"A *hard* life?" He couldn't believe his ears for a moment. "I should say, from what I know of him, he's led an exceedingly pleasant and care-free one!"

"In a worldly sense, perhaps," she agreed. "And I suppose it may be all right, or seem all right, for a man like Daddy to have a good time while he is young, but now he is old he must realize poignantly how futile it has all been."

Ashley grimaced. He did so to prevent himself laughing out loud. Old Redcliffe, with his cocktail parties, his excellent chef, his intense good humor, not to mention his latest appendage, the exotic and colorful Mademoiselle Perrier, thinking of his life as futile! This incredible girl had one or two surprises in store for her.

"I thought we were going to talk about *you*," he remarked after a pause. "What do you want to make of your life, Miss Redcliffe? You've almost enough money to buy the earth and the moon and the stars, I understand."

"Not at all," she said practically. "There are at least three fortunes in the United States alone

larger than mine. And one thing I want to do with my life is to spend it wisely and not waste it."

"But what about *you* personally? What do you hope lies in the magic crystal for you? An unexciting domesticity with this very estimable young man you intend marrying? This young man whom you have already told me you don't love."

She said angrily: "I never said anything of the sort!"

"Oh, but you have! You've been saying it to me all evening. Your attitude has, anyhow. And every remark you've made about love or marriage has literally shrieked it."

"You've no right to say that!"

"Haven't I? But it seems to me you've been saying a number of things to me you've no right to say either. Let's waive the question of right and admit you're not in love with your fiancé. Not, at least, as you might be in love with one man someday—if you have it in you."

She found herself resenting that, resenting it intensely—especially the skepticism in his voice as he said the last sentence. She felt he was criticizing her, and most unfairly. What right had he to insinuate that she hadn't it in her to love a man, really love him, as some of the women in Ouida's novels loved their men, and not in the modern way at all? For the moment she didn't

realize that she was practically admitting to herself that she was not in love with Peter in that way.

"Why should you think I haven't it in me?" she demanded.

He turned and looked down at her. He was standing quite close to her, so close he could have put out his hand and touched her. But he didn't need to touch her to make her suddenly intensely aware of him. It was the expression in his pale eyes, the tautness of his whole body.

"Well, have you it in you?" he asked quietly.

And when she didn't speak—she found herself speechless, incapable even of moving a finger—he added, even more quietly: "Let's see if you have it in you, then."

He pulled her to her feet. He pulled her close to him. She could feel his chest move when he breathed. She could feel her own heart thumping against his body.

She knew just what he was going to do, that he was going to kiss her, but she was incapable of movement or of voicing the faintest protest.

He kissed her. At first he did so in a spirit of derision. Hardly, crushing her lips under his as though some of the anger in his heart remained. The next time he kissed her his lips were more gentle. The anger was gone, and the sense of her beauty was with him. He realized how soft her lips were, how smooth was the texture of her skin. He realized, too, how very untutored she

was in this art of love-making. It made him feel ashamed, but not sufficiently ashamed to stop kissing her. Had she protested or drawn away he might have stopped, but she did neither. She lay there as a child might have lain, or a woman very much in love.

It was some little time before he released her, and even then she didn't move or speak. She just stood there, her young breasts moving, her eyes incredibly wide. It was then he saw the tear in them, one tear only that clung to her very long lashes.

Ashley, who had never been humble or contrite to any woman, heard himself mutter: "I'm sorry. . . . I've hurt you."

She drew a long breath. "I didn't mind."

"I'll go." He tried to grin. "I really have an appointment. There's a key on the inside. You'd better lock yourself in."

"You think it's dangerous for me to—to be alone here?" She seemed to be feeling her way toward words with difficulty.

"Well—don't you?" He tried to make that sound flippant but failed.

She dropped her eyes, and the bewildering lashes hid them.

"Yes—perhaps."

"I'll go. As I said, I really have that appointment." (How stupidly he kept repeating things.)

"You'll be all right if you lock yourself in, and your—your fiancé will be back before daybreak."

Thanks for a pleasant evening, Miss Redcliffe. Maybe I'll see you at breakfast in the morning."

He moved out through the open door onto the porch. He drew the fresh air into his lungs. He felt saner. He'd better be getting down to that warehouse or he might be missing something—or somebody. He had crossed the tiny patch of garden and felt the crunch of the sand under his bare feet, when he heard her voice.

"Mr.—er—Wood."

Ridiculous in these circumstances that she didn't seem quite able to recall his name!

He turned back and came and stood at the foot of the step that led onto the porch. She had hobbled out onto the balcony and was leaning against one of the supports. He found himself thinking that, in the moonlight, her hair was like the silver tinsel one hangs on a Christmas tree. Coils of silver tinsel, her face like a cameo, and eyes like those stars above the cabin.

"Yes?" He didn't mean to speak harshly, but he did.

"I—I"—she was stammering very badly—"I was just thinking that if you really wanted to go back to England and fight for your country and—and hadn't the fare——"

"That wasn't what you came out to say to me."

"No." But the word seemed to be torn from her.

He sprang up the one step and took her in his arms. He took her and held her there, and time

was stationary. He did not know how often he kissed her or how often she kissed him. He only knew at last that he must go. It wasn't common sense or honor that prompted his decision; it was something more primitive. The desire every man has to protect one woman.

He let her go so suddenly, she fell back against the support.

"Thanks for the offer of the ticket home, Miss Redcliffe," he said and was gone.

Chapter 6

LATE that same afternoon Sir Hugo Richards had come into the room where June sat working. He looked less like Santa Claus and more like an irritable elderly man with blood pressure. He liked both port and red meat, and he knew he shouldn't touch either.

"When the devil's Ashley coming back?" he stood in the door and rasped out.

"He said he'd be back by the end of the week," June offered.

"The end of the week? He's dashed well got to come back at once! Three cables from the Home Office today, and I'm danged if I know how to deal with them! Awful confession of inefficiency, eh? But that's one reason I've been

moderately successful, June—at least as successful as I've cared to be. Always knew my own limitations. Can't someone get hold of Ashley for me? Where is he?"

"He's at his hut on the other side of the island. I—I could drive over and fetch him for you."

"No need for you to trouble, m'dear. We can send a chauffeur for him."

"But I'd enjoy the drive, honestly, Sir Hugo. It's a lovely evening. It's going to be a bright clear night."

"Would you?" He raised a shaggy eyebrow and gave her a sly look. It made her feel uncomfortably sure that he was not as stupid as she had always supposed. "Well, maybe you would. I was young once and liked moonlight driving too. But bring him straight back here. No back-to-nature stuff when the two of you get to that deplorably isolated spot he retires to—God knows what for!" He chuckled and left the room.

June sat staring down at her typewriter and said to herself: "Idiot. Poor little idiot, you. You know there is no earthly need for *you* to fetch him. As Sir Hugo said, the chauffeur could go. Much better to leave him alone. Maybe then he'll come to you and explain what he meant the other night. It's not going to do you any good chasing after him."

But even as she reached this sensible conclusion she was straightening the papers beside her desk and putting the cover on her typewriter. "You'll

only make a fool of yourself," she went on in her thoughts, "a worse fool than you made of yourself the other night. What if he *did* say he liked you well enough to marry you—or believed he did. He didn't say he'd marry you, did he? Not definitely say it. 'If I meet no one I like better . . .' Bah! Soft soap! Balm to your poor wounded pride! If you had any sense, June Martin, you'd sit right down before your desk . . ." But already she had her hat on and was through the front door of the embassy.

She went first to the Fleurie and threw a few things into a suitcase. Despite the bad roads she hoped to make his hut by ten or eleven o'clock. They might start straight back or wait until day-break. She could sleep in the car, or perhaps Ashley could sleep in the car and she in his cabin.

"Anyhow, he made it plain you'd be perfectly safe with him," she told herself derisively.

She had the small car filled with petrol and oil and started out. The heat of the afternoon was gone; there was a welcome coolness in the air and a very faint breeze. As she climbed up toward the purple hills that ringed the town on one side, she passed Plantation House and noticed there were signs of unusual activity. Several natives were weeding and sweeping the drive; another couple were painting the front of the house. On the porch sat old Redcliffe, giving orders and fanning himself with his Panama hat.

"Getting ready for Daughter's arrival," she

thought. "I wonder if he's managed to dislodge dear Mademoiselle Perrier."

The idea of Felicité Perrier and Miss Sandra Redcliffe under the same roof amused her so much she chuckled aloud.

"I wouldn't miss that party he's giving tomorrow night in honor of his daughter's arrival for anything," she decided. "Ashley won't miss it either now."

She was glad of that. A party without Ashley was just no party. Even the moon that was showing very faintly over the top of the hills was no moon without him.

Twenty miles from the town the road became so bad that one could not travel over twenty-five miles an hour; ten miles after that one had to slow down to fifteen. The little car shook as though it had St. Vitus's dance, and the string which fastened the door at one side broke. The door rattled and banged. She had a puncture, and halfway through changing the tire her flashlight failed. She felt hot and tired, and her hands were filthy. She began to regret her decision to fetch Ashley. "I'm always getting it in the neck when I try to be romantic!" she thought bitterly. "Maybe I'm stepping out of character. Maybe I'm not the romantic type."

Certainly, she reflected, Ashley didn't seem to find her romantic. That other men had didn't count.

It was quite dark now, and the moon had dis-

appointed her; it was merely a vague promise seen through clouds. She saw the odd shapes of shrubs and bushes as she drove by, and the long tattered arms of the banana trees. She saw the outline of native huts, their thatched roofs faintly yellow, and she became very conscious of the fact that she was thirsty and hungry and tired. It was late too. The puncture had taken her the dickens of a time; it was almost eleven, and she hadn't even reached Leboeuf, the small native village which was fifteen miles from Ashley's hut. At Leboeuf she would stop and get something to drink and maybe something to eat. George, the old colored man who had a garage of sorts and a car for hire there, would give her that. But when Leboeuf was exactly two miles away on the speedometer the car stopped dead.

"Oh heavens," she thought, "*who* suggested this drive?"

When the car refused to start again she knew she would have to walk into Leboeuf and get hold of old George. But the prospect of a two-mile walk in the almost pitch-darkness didn't appeal to her. It wasn't that she was frightened, but some of the shrubs threw very menacing shapes, and the banana trees *could* look like skeletons stretching out their arms for you. Or ghosts. She didn't believe in ghosts although all the natives did. They believed in all sorts of strange and odd apparitions. Most of them believed in and practiced voodoo. They thought if you laid

sticks crossed in a certain way on a man's threshold he would surely die and that a chicken's foot carried next to your skin would cure certain diseases. It wasn't a pleasant religion, voodoo; it was a shivery religion, and she wished she hadn't started thinking about it now. She sat in the car and kept telling herself she ought to start that walk into Leboeuf and doing nothing about it. Presently she noticed with surprise and distress that the hands of the small clock on her dashboard pointed past midnight.

It was shortly after this that she heard a man's footsteps coming out of the night. She had just time to be really scared when this tall form loomed up beside her car and his voice with a crisp American accent said:

"Can I do anything to help you, and can you do anything to help me?"

"If you could get this wretched car started again you'd help *me*," she said.

"If I did you might also help *me*." (It sounded quite a crazy conversation.) "That is, if you are going the way you're pointed."

"But you would appear to be going in the opposite direction," she suggested.

"I know, but only through my inability to get satisfaction out of anyone at that rotten dump of a village two miles back."

"You mean Leboeuf? What did you want there?"

"A car and a chauffeur. Or just a car."

"An old colored man named George has a car for hire there."

"Yes, but he's so drunk he doesn't know it himself. Incidentally, he doesn't know where the keys to his own garage are either. I fooled around there for a couple of hours, hoping he'd sober up, but he didn't. Then I thought if I walked on I might find another village and another garage."

"There is a village five miles back, but there's no garage there. It's a pity about George. I wanted him to fix this car. But perhaps you can?"

"I'll try," he said doubtfully, "but I'm an awful dud at mechanics. I can drive all right and fly a plane, but the innards of the ornery machines always get me down. Now what do *you* think the trouble is?"

June told him, but she couldn't have been right, for when that was fixed still the car wouldn't go. During the next hour he did everything he could think of, but apparently he wasn't thinking of the right things.

"If there were any light I might be able to fix it," he said dejectedly. "It's a little difficult poking about an engine in the dark."

"I suppose we'll have to wait until daybreak," she replied. "Then if we *can* get it to go I *might* take you on your way. If you had got George's car, where were you going?"

"Back fifteen miles where some beachcomber

fellow has a hut of sorts. I left Miss Redcliffe there centuries ago—or perhaps it is only seven hours.”

“*Miss Redcliffe?*” That made her sit bolt upright. “Did you say *Miss Redcliffe?*”

“Yes, do you know her? But you can’t. She’s never been out here before.”

“I don’t know her, but I *do* know her father. I saw the family mansion being spruced up when I passed. But what’s she doing in a beachcomber’s hut? Incidentally, I didn’t know there were any beachcombers here or anywhere else. I thought they went out when lady novelists decided to let down their back hair.”

His good-looking face flushed, and he was glad it was dark. It was Sandra who had put it into his mind that the fellow was a beachcomber, but when this girl scoffed at the idea he was inclined to agree with her.

“Well, whoever or whatever he is, he’s certainly a queer duck. That’s why I’m anxious to get back. I don’t like the idea of leaving her there alone with him for so long.”

“What nationality is the man?”

“English. Definitely. A very tall fellow in ragged shorts with sandy hair.”

“*And* pale eyes *and* almost colorless eyebrows?”

“Yes. You know him?”

She started to laugh then. She lay back in the seat and giggled helplessly.

"Of course I know him. That's Ashley Wood, my boss," she said.

He stared at her. "*Your boss!*"

"Yes, Mr. Ashley Wood, first secretary at the British Embassy. I'm on my way to fetch him now because Sir Hugo, our minister, wants to confer with him."

"His name *was* Wood," Peter muttered and added: "But I don't believe we're talking of the same man."

But he knew they were. He knew it definitely and he felt quite hot under his collar. He felt as mortified as he had ever felt in his life, especially when he recalled that he had offered him a bribe of fifty dollars to walk to the garage. Other things, too, came back to him unpleasantly. How had the wretched misunderstanding happened? In all fairness he couldn't blame it completely on Sandra.

"Why on earth does he go about in that getup?" he asked angrily.

"Well, don't you go about just anyhow when you're on a camping holiday yourself?"

"Yes, but not—" He paused. He laughed and added: "I hope my shorts are usually cleaner than his were anyhow!"

"Why," June demanded, "do men who are almost dandies in normal life go about looking more disreputable than any native when they are on holiday?"

"I guess it's the nature of the bee

and added humanly: "Gee, he must be having a darned good laugh at our expense."

"Oh, he would," she assured him amiably. "Sometimes I think that Ashley's sense of humor is almost overdeveloped!"

"I wouldn't contradict you there," Peter growled, and she laughed again.

"Anyhow," he said presently, "Miss Redcliffe will be all right with *him*. I don't need to worry about that any more."

"Oh, I'm quite sure Miss Redcliffe will be safe with him! From what I've heard of her she isn't his type at all."

"Look here," he said aggressively, "Miss Redcliffe and I are engaged to be married."

"Oh." She hesitated. "I didn't mean anything rude by what I said. It's just that I happen to know Ashley rather well and I know he isn't keen on intellectual women." She almost added, "or millionairesses," but desisted. There was no point in hurting this young man's feelings unnecessarily.

"She's very beautiful," Peter said.

June's slim body straightened again. "Is she?" Somehow she hadn't expected Sandra Redcliffe to be beautiful.

"Very beautiful," Peter repeated almost in a sad voice. "And she doesn't know it either."

"That's very charming," she said politely.

"Sometimes I think it's a disadvantage," he said.

She didn't know what he meant and she didn't like to ask him. She found herself wishing it wasn't so dark so that she could see him better. She had only a vague impression that he was fairly tall and rather broad. It would be interesting to see the sort of man who was going to marry one of the world's richest women. Was he a fortune hunter, and what did a fortune hunter look like in the flesh? He would have to be handsome. But, on the other hand, he might not be a fortune hunter. Yet why should any man who wasn't one want to marry such a very rich girl who was as unpleasant as Miss Redcliffe must be to have put her poor father into such a dither? She discredited the beautiful. He had probably persuaded himself she was beautiful.

"What are you staring at me for?" he asked.

She had the grace to stammer: "Was I? I'm sorry. But it's so difficult talking to someone you can't see properly. In fact, whom you've never seen properly."

She felt his smile rather than saw it. "You're right there. I haven't much notion what you're like either." He might have added: "Other than that you have a very pretty voice." It wasn't the time or the place for compliments.

"Would you care to get into the car and sit down? Then we might strike matches and inspect each other."

"That's mighty nice of you. I shouldn't mind

having a sit and a smoke. Would you like a cigarette, by the way?"

"I should enjoy one."

She had a fleeting glimpse of his profile when the match flared up and he cupped it in his hands to light her cigarette. Nice square chin with a faint dimple in it, nice straight nose and firm, serious mouth. She had a feeling that his eyes were dark brown. She didn't know why. No, he didn't look like a fortune hunter. He was the antithesis of the gigolo type.

They were silent for a while as they smoked their cigarettes. "I suppose," she suggested, "you haven't anything to eat on you?"

"Gee, I'm sorry. I got a couple of sandwiches at that last dump, but I ate them. I've something left in my flask if that's any use to you."

"Well, I might take a mouthful. I feel pretty tired."

Her voice sounded tired. He felt suddenly contrite, though that she was tired was certainly no fault of his. Probably it was Ashley's fault, asking her to drive over for him at this ungodly hour. He felt better himself, being able to blame Ashley for something.

She felt revived after a mouthful or two of brandy. Even her hunger seemed appeased.

"I suppose we'd better reconcile ourselves to spending what remains of the night here," she said. "How's your supply of cigarettes?"

He felt in his pocket. "I've still got an unopened packet. But—are you serious about spending the night here?"

She moved her slim shoulders in a faint shrug. "What else is there for us to do? We might be able to get the car going when it's light. You're welcome to that seat if you care to occupy it."

"That's kind of you. Most kind."

He thought it very sporting of her to have made the offer. After all, he might have been any sort of bum. He found himself wishing again he could see her better. She had such a nice voice, she must be pleasant to look at. Not beautiful as Sandra was beautiful, he amended hastily. No one could be quite as beautiful as she.

"You're English, aren't you?" he suggested.

She told him she was. Also, since in the darkness it was nice to feel that someone was near and it was nice to talk, she told him the circumstances which had originally brought her to Karpeti.

"Your parents are dead," he said. "That's tough. Gee, I think it must be rotten to be a girl alone in the world."

June, who was the last person given to self-pity, was touched by the genuine sympathy in his voice. She decided he was far too nice for the Redcliffe girl. The more she talked to him, the less he seemed like a fortune hunter.

She smiled in the darkness. "Well, I seem to

have managed all right so far." But she thought that she had really managed very badly, falling in love with Ashley in this stupid manner.

"I'm an orphan myself," he offered. "My father died a year or so ago, and I never knew my mother. Perhaps that's why women have always seemed to me more or less of a mystery."

June gave a small laugh that had a certain bitterness in it.

"Are we a mystery? I thought some of us were rather painfully obvious!"

"Maybe it's because of my job that I don't seem to know much about women."

"What is your job?"

"I'm an anthropologist." He added, a touchingly humble note in his voice: "Sounds dull, doesn't it?"

"I don't know."

"Oh, you needn't spare my feelings! Most women obviously think it dull—or completely unglamorous. Their expressions tell me that! Sandra doesn't, of course. She's intellectual and understands. But most women——"

"I wish you wouldn't say 'most women' like that," she broke in on him crossly. "I hate men who lump women together mentally as though they were a herd of cattle! Of course you *did* make an exception of your fiancée. You must consider yourself very fortunate to have discovered such an intelligent young woman!"

She hadn't meant to speak so caustically, but

there was something about the very mention of that Redcliffe girl that got under her skin.

"I'm sorry if I stepped on your toes," he said contritely. "Sandra *is* exceptional, but I'm sure there are other exceptional girls."

"If you mean me, I'm afraid I'm not in the running. I'm thoroughly ordinary and not in the least intellectual. At the moment I don't even consider myself an *intelligent* being."

"Say, you *are* mad at me, aren't you? I *am* sorry. You've been so decent, too, inviting me to sit in here with you."

She felt contrite. It was stupid and childish to have let her temper get out of hand. "I don't know what's the matter with me," she thought, "unless it's unrequited love. Unrequited love seems to be disastrous to one's sense of humor."

"That's all right. But men who generalize about women always do get in my hair. Then I suppose I'm tired."

"You must be. All this trouble with your car and then not getting to your destination."

"And no supper. I'm a perfect vixen unless I'm well fed. I'm glad I wasn't a Victorian young miss who had to faint at the very sight of a square meal!"

"I like girls with healthy appetites."

"Miss Redcliffe has a healthy appetite?"

"When she remembers about eating. She is usually rather preoccupied with—" He paused. The phrase "worth-while things" was on his

tongue because it was a favorite expression of Sandra's. Somehow when Sandra said it, it didn't sound priggish, but he felt that this girl might think it was.

Oddly June said: "Do you mean more worthwhile things?"

He started. "How—how did you know?"

She smiled quietly in the darkness. "I just thought you might be meaning that."

For some reason he felt angry. "Well, I didn't. I was going to say with her studies."

"I *am* sorry I misunderstood you." Poor Ashley, she thought, he must have had a dreadful time stuck for even one evening with that young woman!

There was a pause. Peter broke it.

"What about another cigarette?"

She thanked him more profusely than was necessary. She was grateful to him for breaking the silence which in fairness she had to admit had been caused by her ill-humor.

"Are you going to anthropologize out here?"

"Yes. This is a swell place for reptiles, I believe."

"Oh, indeed it is! Especially those of the two-legged variety. I could show you a few specimens."

"I've met one myself already," Peter said with feeling. He couldn't forgive Ashley for the deception he had practiced on them. Why hadn't the man said outright he was in the diplomatic

corps? Why pretend he was a beachcomber?

"You're not referring to Mr. Wood, are you?"

June's voice was dangerous. So dangerous he was startled. There was a real intensity of fury in it.

"Oh, er—er—I wasn't," he said weakly.

"You're a very bad liar. What has my boss done to displease you?"

"Well, he might have told us the truth about himself and not let us think him some sort of a remittance man. Very poor joke, to say the least," he burst out.

"You mean he's made you feel foolish?"

"Well—in a way. But I don't think much of a man who'd do a thing like that merely to get a laugh on another fellow. Shows there's something warped about his mentality."

"And I don't think much of a man who becomes engaged to a dumb female simply because she's an heiress!"

She had said it in the heat of the moment. She could have bitten out her tongue afterward. "Lordy, lordy, there *is* something wrong with me," she thought wretchedly.

"Oh, so that's what you think?" His voice was like the chill of the night outside—the chill of those few hours before the dawn breaks.

Something within her drove her on to say: "Well, isn't it fairly obvious?"

"It might be, if I didn't have almost as much money as Sandra has. Don't think I'm bragging, but you asked for it."

There was a small unhappy pause, then she said:

"I'm sorry. Yes, I did ask for that, didn't I?"

"That's all right." But his voice showed her that it wasn't all right yet.

"Do forgive me. I suppose I resented your criticizing Ashley. You must be very much in love with Miss Redcliffe."

"I am."

"Because she is beautiful as well as being intelligent?"

He laughed suddenly, and with his nice full laughter she knew that his ill-humor was gone.

"Not altogether. I love her mainly because she doesn't know the first thing about life and is so completely humorless."

"But you can't love her for that reason—because she's humorless!"

"Can't I? I think I do. I can't explain it either, except that it makes her seem very sweet and completely vulnerable."

She asked after a small pause: "You think she is more vulnerable without a sense of humor?"

"Undoubtedly. Personally I can't see how one could go through life in comfort unless one could laugh at oneself. But Sandra can't. Or at least she hasn't up to date. That's what makes me so very afraid for her. You see, if anything went really wrong in her life it would go so very hard with her. I feel I must be there to prevent that happening. Am I explaining myself badly?"

"I think I see a little what you mean." She added with a smile: "It's connected up with the good old chivalrous instinct, I take it?"

He laughed again. "You may be right there."

The cigarette was burning her fingers. She threw it out into the night. She shivered suddenly and realized that she was cold and dreadfully, dreadfully tired. Her eyelids felt so heavy she wished she could prop them up with her fingers.

"I *am* tired," she sighed.

The intense weariness in her voice did something to him. A few minutes before he had been thinking of her as a self-reliant young woman, but suddenly she seemed to him a weary little girl. A rather lovable little girl too.

"Look here," he said, "why don't you try and get a few hours' sleep? Lean against me and use my shoulder as a pillow."

"Well"—she hesitated—"I might. But what about you?"

"Oh, I'll be all right. I may doze off myself."

There was another pause, and then very tentatively she did as he suggested. The rough material of his coat felt good against her cheek, warm and comforting. Oddly she had not the slightest fear of him. "He really is a nice young man," she thought drowsily. "I'm sorry I said that about the dumb heiress. But if he has money of his own why on earth did he become engaged to her?"

Chapter 7

EARLY MORNINGS can seem more brilliant in the tropics than anywhere on earth. There is about them a sparkling clearness combined with a softness that one finds nowhere else. Sandra, looking through the window of Ashley's cabin shortly after sunrise, felt as though she were in Paradise. The sky was the bluest blue, rivaled only by the sea which had taken on a slightly deeper shade. The tall palm trees were like gay green umbrellas on ridiculously long and sturdy handles. The sand was a curve of sheer gold. It looked as though the pixies had been up hours ago sweeping it. The air was so balmy it made one want to stretch out one's hands and gather it in as though it were nectar. Sandra said aloud some lines of Keats:

*"The same that oft-times hath
Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn."*

She felt it *was* sheer magic, this landscape she was gazing out on, and some of the magic had entered into her soul. She was conscious of it and was thrilled by it and, although not fully aware of the cause of it, knew at least that Ashley had something to do with it. Somewhere near he,

too, would be enjoying this clear, sparkling morning. Where had he slept? But perhaps he hadn't slept. Perhaps he, like her, had been too disturbed last night to sleep—at least for some hours. A man whom the world had cast out, yet who was at heart a gallant gentleman.

Last night he had torn himself away from her and had saved her honor. She still did not believe his story of an appointment. In fact, she was convinced that no appointment had existed. Nevertheless, he had gone and she was sufficiently honest to admit that when he had gone she had not wanted him to go.

Yes, a ne'er-do-well in the eyes of the world but, at heart, a gallant gentleman.

She said that over to herself softly, and there was a suggestion of tears in her bewilderingly blue, blue eyes. Something must, of course, be done about him. For Sandra to take an interest in anything or anyone meant that something must be done about it or them. And at once. She had little or no patience with delay, and she had all the driving force of young college-trained American womanhood. He had refused her offer of money for a passage home. That, too, proved how right she was in her feeling about him. He must be made to accept help, and not merely passage money, but sufficient to put him on his feet once he got back to England. To reinstate him both in the eyes of the world and in the eyes of his father—that sour old feudal baron who

lived in the deplorably antique castle without proper American plumbing.

She visualized the scene of reconciliation between him and his embittered sire, and the mist before her eyes thickened. Mr. Wood (she did not yet know that his name was Ashley) would be in uniform. He would be an officer with maybe one or even two ribbons on his chest. His father would have a mass of gray hair and be leaning heavily on a twisted cane.

"I see I was wrong," the old baron would mumble into his beard. "But I'm proud of you, my son, proud of you." He would then produce a large white monogrammed handkerchief and blow his nose violently. Mr. Wood would say—but of course it would then be Captain Wood or even Major Wood—anyhow, he would say: "That's all right, Dad." (But didn't English sons call their fathers sir? She seemed to remember reading that somewhere.) "That's all right, sir. But let me introduce you to the little lady who is responsible for everything. She had faith in me when the whole world was against me. She gave me back not only my birthright but my honor."

She would appear then. Just what she had been doing during this conversation she didn't know, possibly wandering about the ancestral park where there would be lots of deer and great copper-beech trees. Mr., Captain, or Major Wood would take her hand and say:

"Allow me to present you, sir, to the dearest

and most wonderful girl in the whole world, Miss Sandra Redcliffe."

A thought which flashed through her mind at that moment rather spoiled the poignant beauty of this scene. What about Peter? Would he be there? But there didn't seem any place for him either in the scene or in the old baronial hall itself. He *might* be waiting for her outside in a motor-car, but that idea did not appeal to her much. Somehow it robbed the scene of a great deal of its glamour. But Peter, she thought with a faint sigh, would have to be fitted in somewhere. After all, she was going to marry Peter.

Since the problem was a vexing one she turned away from the window and started to dress. She still had difficulty in moving about, although her ankle was considerably better this morning. She went over to the small mirror above the bureau and looked at herself more critically than she usually did. Up to now she had taken very little interest in her personal appearance. There had always been more important things to think about, her studies, the management of her large fortune, various social and world problems. But this morning she looked at herself almost impersonally and, finding that she was beautiful, she felt both pleased and strangely humble. The morning sunshine, slanting in through the window, made the heavy ropes of hair that fell half-way to her waist shine as though they were plaited of golden thread; her blue eyes with the

violet shadows looked unusually large, and they were still faintly misty. Her face was a little flushed, but the softness of her lovely mouth was emphasized. She stood there for a considerable time, and then she tried arranging her two coils of hair in different ways, looped over her ears, knotted in at her neck.

When would he come? She glanced down at her wrist watch which had miraculously survived the crash. Seven-thirty. He would come for breakfast. Perhaps at eight? She might have breakfast ready before he got here. She hoped he would hurry. She found she was hungry, yet that wasn't the reason she hoped he would hurry. At the back of her mind was the thought that Peter might be back any time now with a car. She didn't find it surprising he hadn't come back before. He might have had difficulty in procuring a car or have been uncertain of the way and decided to wait until morning. Poor Peter, she hoped he hadn't had too much trouble. He was a dear, good-looking, intelligent, dependable. All the same she hoped he wouldn't come back too soon. There was still much she wanted to say to Mr. Wood.

She managed to get the Primus to burn. Once she had gone camping with a selected group of young friends. She found some tea and half a loaf of bread in a tin. There was no butter. That was probably in the hole in the stream under the waterfall which he called his icebox. But there

was a tin of grapefruit. She put the contents out in two saucers, and again it didn't strike her as strange that a genuine beachcomber should have a fancy for grapefruit. She had almost finished her preparations when she heard the sound of a car drive up and stop at the side of the cabin. Since it was out of the question that Mr. Wood would have a car she decided it must be Peter.

"Oh, damn," she said aloud and was not a little shocked at herself. Swearing, no matter what the provocation, she had always considered a waste of time and unnecessary.

She limped over and opened the porch door just in time to see Peter get out of a small dilapidated two-seater car and help a girl out. Sandra noticed fleetingly that the girl was pretty, and she wondered what she was doing in the car with him.

"Hello, Peter. So you're back." She tried to make her voice sound cordial.

"Hello, darling. I hope you haven't had too wretched a time." He sprang up the porch step, took both her hands, but he didn't kiss her. He had kissed her in front of Ashley deliberately, but he didn't kiss her in front of June. There was a difference, but perhaps he wasn't aware of the subtleties of it himself.

She drew herself up slightly. "Of course I haven't had a wretched time, Peter. Mr. Wood has behaved in every respect as a perfect gentleman."

"Well, you're the first woman I've ever heard admit that of Ashley," June remarked, smiling, as she came up and joined them. "Or perhaps they were flattering themselves."

Sandra turned toward her and said stiffly: "I don't know what you mean." Her inflection said: "I don't know you either!" It almost said: "I don't think I want to much."

"Oh well," June apologized, "a woman doesn't usually admit that a man has behaved as a perfect gentleman toward her these days even when he has. Maybe she thinks it smacks of Victorianism."

Sandra didn't reply to that. She was looking at June as though she were trying to make up her mind about her, and oddly June was looking at her in much the same way. Instinctively they seemed to be taking each other's measure as two adversaries about to enter the boxing ring. It must have been instinctive, for just then they had no conscious dislike or even fear of the other.

"Look here, you two haven't met, have you?" Peter said, stating the obvious. "Sandra, this is Miss June Martin. Miss Martin is Mr. Wood's secretary. Miss Redcliffe, Miss Martin."

June held out her hand, but Sandra didn't take it. She said in a small, incredulous voice: "She is *what?*"

Peter coughed and looked unhappy. "She is Mr. Wood's secretary. I'm afraid, dear, we made

a mistake about Mr. Wood. I mean about his station in life."

"You did," June said and added cruelly: "I nearly died laughing when Mr. Slade told me."

"You mean he—he isn't—" Sandra seemed to be having difficulty in articulating at all.

Peter came hastily to her rescue.

"We can't really blame ourselves, Sandra. As I said to Miss Martin, I think he might have said something to put us on the right track. I'm afraid"—his nice voice hardened—"he was enjoying a joke at our expense."

"Then who—who *is* he?" Sandra insisted. Her voice was hoarse.

"He's first secretary at the British Legation, and I work for him," June supplied.

"I see," Sandra said. She turned blindly into the cabin. She couldn't have said whether she was more angry or humiliated or hurt. But whichever emotion predominated she had never felt more dreadful in her life. She had never felt, either, that sharp sense of hatred. But oddly the hatred wasn't so much for Ashley as for this girl who had told her about him.

Peter was talking to fill in that uncomfortable gap in the conversation. She only heard disjointed sentences.

"On my way in search of another car I came upon Miss Martin stuck in the road. . . . Got it going fairly easily at daybreak, drove back

into Leboeuf. . . Sober enough this morning, so he's on his way out here with a second car. . ."

Sandra blinked back some annoying tears which had forced their way into her eyes. "Who is on his way out here with another car?"

"But, darling, I was just telling you! The old colored fellow named George who runs a garage of sorts at Leboeuf. He promised to start off right after us. He'll drive us back into Princeville. Incidentally, I left a message to be telephoned through to your father." He paused. "I hear the sound of a car now. That must be the old fellow arriving."

Sandra spoke jerkily. "Oh, is it? I'm glad he's come quickly. We can start this very minute, Peter."

"Hold on," Peter said in astonishment. "What about my plane? At least I ought to go down and give it the once-over."

"But you couldn't start it again, could you? Merely to look at it seems a waste of time. Once you get to Princeville you can bring a good mechanic back with you."

"Yes, I suppose I *could*," he admitted, scratching his head in indecision.

"Of course you can." Her voice was still staccato. "There is nothing whatsoever to keep us here. Luckily you brought our suitcases out of the plane yesterday evening. You can start putting them into the car at once."

"But look here," he objected, "isn't there a chance of some breakfast first? I must say I'm starved. Only some foul sandwiches last night and nothing but a cup of tea without any milk when we stopped at Leboeuf this morning. Besides," he added, looking hungrily at the table, "someone seems to have prepared breakfast here for someone."

"I—I thought Mr. Wood—" Sandra began and stopped.

"By the way," June put in, "where *is* my revered boss?"

"He went out last night to keep an appointment," Sandra said.

"You mean he didn't sleep here?"

"Of course he didn't sleep here!"

June grinned. "Now I understand what you meant when you said he'd behaved like a perfect gentleman!"

Sandra, usually the most amiable of beings, could have slapped her. She knew now definitely that she didn't like Miss Martin, and at the same time she knew that her dislike was unreasonable. This upset her, for she had always prided herself upon her extreme reasonableness. "Only unintelligent people give way to unreasonable impulses or feelings," she had said more than once.

Now she merely said: "Shall we go, Peter?"

But he was still looking hungrily at the neatly laid breakfast table. "I don't see what is wrong with a spot of breakfast," he objected. "And any-

how, Sandra, you should wait and thank your host for the night's hospitality."

"I shall do nothing of the sort," Sandra burst out, driven beyond endurance. "Why should I thank him? He deliberately deceived us. He lied to me. He——" But she pulled herself up, conscious that she was losing control of her tongue. She stood for a minute, her hands clenched by her sides, biting her lower lip. Peter, who had never seen her look in the least like that, was considerably startled. It even penetrated to him that something was very wrong, so that when she said again: "*Shall* we go, Peter?" he made no further allusion to breakfast but began taking the suitcases from the porch into the car.

George's car was an open Ford. Open perforce, for the canvas hood when erected was a mere tattered banner in the breeze. He didn't offer to help Peter with the suitcases. George never moved when he could sit still. He was a big colored man with a polished ebony face, twinkling dark eyes, and a shock of grizzly white hair. No one knew how old he was, and George didn't tell anyone. Possibly he didn't know. He was indolent, good-natured, and his passion in life was seeing how far he could coast down hills to save petrol.

Sandra said to June: "Good-by, Miss Martin. I don't suppose we'll meet again, but it's been awfully nice knowing you."

She had recovered somewhat and had instinc-

tively fallen back on her "little-rich-princess" manner, as Peter termed it affectionately to himself. He knew that with her it was unconscious; that was why he didn't mind it. But June didn't know this, and it annoyed her; besides, already she had a strange feeling about Sandra that wasn't comfortable.

"Oh, we'll meet again all right," she said cheerfully. "I'm coming to the party your father is giving for you tonight."

"Father is giving a party for me?"

"Yes, didn't you know? Perhaps he meant it as a surprise. If I've let the cat out of the bag I'm sorry."

"That's quite all right. I haven't had a chance to communicate with my father yet." She smiled and added: "It will be nice seeing you there."

June, unfairly, resented the smile. She felt it was condescending, though it wasn't intended to be. She said: "Mr. Wood will be there too. You'll have a chance then to thank him for his hospitality."

Sandra's lovely face reddened. For the second time she was aware of an active dislike for this girl. But she merely said: "Yes, of course I shall," and went out to the car.

Peter lingered behind to say good-by to June. He felt irritated with Sandra for rushing off in this way and not altogether on account of the missed breakfast. He felt sorry at leaving this nice companionable girl, the sort of girl he felt

could be a real friend to a fellow. They had been through a fairly unusual adventure together without a hint of embarrassment.

"I'm glad we'll be seeing each other this evening," he said and smiled as he squeezed her hand.

"Yes, that will be nice. Thanks for fixing the car for me."

"It was really quite simple once you could see what you were doing."

"Yes, but that makes it all the more annoying. I'm sure cars are like the Duchess's baby in *Alice in Wonderland*. 'He only does it to annoy because he knows it teases.' I could almost hear that dashed old car laughing in mocking derision when it finally consented to be started up!"

Peter chortled. "I did hear something like a derisive splutter, I admit! It certainly took it out on you, but luckily no harm has been done."

"No, no harm has been done," she agreed. But there was to come a time when she would look back upon that statement as a blatant falsehood.

"Peter!" It was Sandra's voice from the car.

He frowned. "I suppose I *had* better go."

"Of course. Keeping a lady waiting never paid any man yet. We'll meet tonight."

"I am looking forward to that."

"Peter!" Sandra's voice this time definitely reproved him. It was also puzzled. Peter had never kept her waiting like this before. She was sitting perched high on the back seat of the car, looking, June thought cruelly, like a modern Lady Vere

de Vere. Peter climbed in beside her, slammed the door with unnecessary force; old George made an awful noise with his gears, and the car started off.

"Need you have kept shouting at me?" he asked, raising his voice to make himself heard above the rattle of the car.

"But, Peter"—she turned surprised eyes toward him—"I was only letting you know I was waiting."

"What if you were? It doesn't hurt you to wait a few minutes, does it?"

She couldn't rightly believe her ears. Peter, who had for so many years been her devoted slave, talking to her like this! And so unjustly! Why, she had only called him twice, and he had been keeping not only her waiting but the chauffeur as well. She told herself virtuously that one should always consider menials and knew at the same time the argument was a pretty poor one. The old man driving the car hadn't seemed to mind waiting in the least. Anyhow, it wasn't as if Peter had been doing anything important, only saying polite good-bys to that girl who was Mr. Wood's secretary. But the thought of Mr. Wood having a secretary made her feel hot with mortification again.

"Why didn't you bring this car back last night, Peter? Why did you keep me waiting for hours and hours for you?"

"I explained, if you'd listened. I couldn't—er

—make our friend here realize just what I wanted. I was on my way to the next village, thinking I might be able to pick up a car there. I came upon Miss Martin stranded with her car in the middle of the road. We couldn't get it to go until after daybreak."

"Then where did you spend the night, Peter?"

"In the car with Miss Martin."

"You mean you spent the *whole* night in the car with her?"

"Well, as much of the night as there was left."

"But, Peter was that wise?"

"What do you mean by 'was that wise'? I trusted you to spend the entire night with Wood, didn't I?"

"Yes, but—— Anyhow, he had told us he had an appointment."

"Did you believe that?"

She was sufficiently honest to say: "I didn't, but I think now that he might have had."

She was striving to get all her tangled emotions adjusted. To put fancies from her, to adjust her mind to facts. Mr. Wood wasn't a beachcomber or a remittance man. He hadn't been sent out here in disgrace. There was no irascible feudal father or ancient baronial home. At least it didn't seem likely that there was. He was merely a young man with a job and apparently a fairly important one. He was first secretary and had a secretary himself. Why had he let them think him a beachcomber? More important, why had

he played up to this belief in that disgraceful way? She went quite cold thinking of their conversation of the night before. She had even offered to pay his passage money home to England so that he could fight for his country! And that wasn't all. There were other things she wouldn't dare think about—yet. Things she had thrust into a closed compartment of her mind and prayed she could keep them there.

"But you should have tried to get back somehow," she insisted, feeling unjustly that the whole thing was somehow his fault. "Whatever you did, you should have tried—not to have sat calmly all night in the car with that wretched girl! I—I never thought you'd behave like that, Peter."

He was more than ever astounded. Sandra, who was always so beautifully logical, talking this way—talking like any normal girl who is peeved and put out and doesn't trouble to or can't hide her feelings.

"Miss Martin isn't a wretched girl. She is a very charming girl," he said with dignity. "I don't know what's the matter with you, Sandra. If you did have to spend all night in Wood's hut you got a good sleep, which is more than I did. After all," he added, repeating June's words, "no great harm has been done."

"No harm," she echoed. But suddenly the thoughts she had pushed to the back of her mind refused to stay there. She was in Ashley's arms, his lips on hers, her lips on his, her arms returning

the pressure of his arms, her heart beating against his heart. Time had stood still. He had broken away from her, and she had followed him, limping painfully out onto the porch. But she had never said what had been in her heart to say to him. Oh, thank God she hadn't said it now!

Peter said: "Here, what on earth? Oh, darling, darling, have I said something to hurt you?" His voice was rough with concern; his arms were about her. He had never seen Sandra cry like that before. He hadn't believed she could cry in that way. He had loved her, but in his heart he had never really believed her to be human. But it was certainly a very human sobbing girl whom he held in his arms.

Chapter 8

JUNE, instead of Sandra, had breakfast ready when Ashley returned. He brought by the scruff of his neck a frightened native with him whom he locked in the outside shed "to cool off," as he put it.

"He's talked some," he said, "and he's going to talk more. I've been pursuing that gentleman through the bush for the past two hours. I have nothing against him personally, but I have a great deal against certain of his friends or acquaint-

ances. I'm not quite clear as to who they are at present, but before I leave here I'm going to persuade him that though silence may be golden there are times when it brings a lot of punishment with it."

"You are positively brutal, Ashley," June said with great affection. "You shock me."

"You mean I make you shiver deliciously. Incidentally, you might inform me how it comes I left a beautiful Brunhild here last night and find a brown-haired vixen to greet me in the morning."

"Brunhild has gone off with her Siegfried, and the snow-white charger took the shape of George's old Ford. She seemed rather anxious to get away too. I gather you did a little gentle leg-pulling which she didn't altogether appreciate last night. Bad lad." She smiled at him.

His thin face slipped sideways in a grin, but it wasn't a comfortable grin. "Oh—er—she found out the truth?"

"Yes, this morning. Her young man and I told her. I can't say she seemed pleased at your altered status. But perhaps it was the feeling that the joke was at her expense she didn't enjoy. The lady didn't strike me as having a great deal of humor."

"No, I don't think she has," he said, rubbing his rather pointed chin with the palm of his hand. "But"—he paused a moment—"she's sweet for all that."

"Sweet?" June's voice was startled. "*Sweet?*" she repeated. "But I thought—" She added more

slowly while a sudden unnamed fear came into her heart, "I thought she wasn't your type at all, Ashley."

"Of course she isn't," he said briskly, even angrily. "Don't be absurd, June. She's too tall and too blonde; she's no sense of humor, as you pointed out; she thinks she's intellectual and has less common sense than any girl I've ever met. She's bigoted and conceited." He paused, drew a long breath and added: "Besides, she stinks of money. A millionairess. Can you imagine *me* married to a millionairess? Why, I'd rather be dead!"

"Aren't you progressing rather fast?" June said in a curiously quiet voice. "I hadn't imagined you married to a millionairess. Not even to Miss Redcliffe."

A hot color rose up under the mahogany tan on his face. For the moment his pale eyes looked angry. Then once more his face slipped sideways in that attractive grin.

"One up to you, June. Sorry if I got heated. But that girl rather got under my skin last night."

"I should say she would get under anyone's skin," she sympathized immediately. "Lady Vere de Vere isn't in it, and when she smiles at you you feel you should curtsy to her. I suppose that's the result of all that money. All the same"—her pretty voice grated—"I'm not going to curtsy to any Yankee heiress!"

Ashley applauded silently. "Nobly spoken, my

love. An honest working girl has her pride and all that. Besides, whoever said that the colonel's lady and Judy O'Grady weren't sisters under the skin? I'm sure I didn't!"

She wrinkled up her attractive nose in a grimace.

"You won't be so uppish when you hear what I've come for. The boss desires your presence with the utmost speed. Whitehall has been pestering him with annoying cables."

"Damn and blast him!" he exploded. "Just when—— Oh well, I suppose I can make George or Henri or whatever his name is talk before I go."

"Would it be prying into grave secrets of state to inquire what you want the gentleman in the shed to talk about?"

Ashley hesitated, then he shrugged his thin shoulders.

"I'll tell you. Perhaps it would be as well for someone to know in case——" He broke off. "No matter. I'll tell you. But first let's eat something. I'm ravenous. Decent of you to have started the breakfast in motion, my pet."

"Don't thank me. Miss Redcliffe had it all set out when I arrived."

"She did?" His voice was strangely eager. "She had it all set? But then——"

"I think the Truth About You, with capitals, Ashley, interfered with her plan. Or perhaps it was our arrival. Mr. Slade's and mine. I wouldn't

know. Anyhow, they both left breakfastless, and you and I are about to benefit. . . You were saying about that native in the shed, and what did you mean by that ominous 'in case'? You don't mean—" She had been speaking lightly, purposely so. But suddenly she couldn't keep it up. There was a note of real fear in her voice as she resumed: "You didn't mean that something serious might happen to you?"

Ashley was pouring out the tea. When he spoke there was no longer any banter in *his* voice.

"One never knows, June, old sweet. At times it's a bit dangerous to know certain things that others may not want you to know. A hit on the bean on a dark night is a very effective silencer. . . Why, what's the matter?"

She had gone so white. Ridiculously white. She was thinking with real panic in her heart: "If anything happened to him . . . if anything happened to him I should die!" But when she spoke her voice had that facetious note in it again.

"Well, you can scarcely expect me to listen to your suggested demise without showing some maidenly concern. If you departed this life who'd fill my waking hours with long, unintelligible reports with grade-Z spelling to type? Who'd have me chasing all around the countryside after him, searching places where the best people certainly don't go, when our revered boss wants a confab? Who'd—" But she stopped. "Who'd there be

for me to love, to live for?" Her thoughts raced on.

"Yes, this is rather serious, June." He drew his chair closer to the table, and for once his voice was almost stern. "Should anything happen to me I should want you to place all the facts before Sir Hugo *and make him listen to them*. Someone is supplying an enemy raider with fuel and supplies from this part of the island. I stumbled upon one old disused warehouse being used as a supply base not far from here. There must be others, and you can bet they're darned carefully hidden. There's obviously a ring arranging the supplies, and I'm going to find out who they are. Old George or Henri in the shed *may* know something, but on the other hand, he may be so far down the ladder that he doesn't know much. Our pal Herr Schmidt is an obvious suspect—too obvious, I fear. To be found connected with anything like this would be a sure way of getting himself booted out of the island, and I should say that was the last thing he wanted. I suspect even a Nazi is happier out of the fatherland these days." He went on talking for some little time, and June listened. She had a quick brain and a retentive memory. After a while he went out to have another chat with the native in the shed. An hour later when he came back he looked tired and discouraged.

"Seems I had my hop, skip, and a jump through the bush for nothing," he said disgruntledly. "He

knows precious little. Only that some time ago he and some friends were paid to act as pack mules—but who actually paid them he doesn't know or won't say. He swears he came sneaking around the warehouse in the early hours of this morning merely to see if he could do some petty pilfering. Unfortunately I'm inclined to believe him."

"That's tough."

He nodded. "You'd better clear out and sit on the porch while I get into some clothes. We'll have to get going."

A short while later when he reappeared even Sandra would have had difficulty in believing him to be a beachcomber. His well-cut pongee suit was spotless and carefully pressed. He was fanning himself with a Panama hat. He looked almost a dandy.

June had been sitting on the porch step, her arms twisted about her knees, her chin sunk onto them.

"It is lovely here, Ashley," she said in an awed voice. "Pity you did me out of that week end—or did I do myself out of it? I'm sure one could feel beautifully platonic here. It seems out of the world, doesn't it?"

"Yes." He came and sat down on the porch step beside her. He took a pipe out of his pocket, tapped the bowl against the veranda edge, filled it slowly, and lighted it. "D'you know," he said, "I'm a bit sorry you didn't come for the week end myself."

Impulsively she reached for his hand. "Are you, Ashley? I'm glad."

"I wish——" he began and stopped and sucked on his pipe. "If she'd come," he was thinking, "I should never have known that other girl's arms. Or her lips. Her sweet untutored lips. I shouldn't have been sitting here cursing her and wanting her and knowing that sometime or other, though hell should intervene, I've got to hold her in my arms again."

He rose abruptly to his feet.

"Let's get going," he said.

Chapter 9

OLD REDCLIFFE was sitting on the wide porch of Plantation House fanning himself with the morning paper when George drove his passengers in great style up the drive. It wasn't often that George was privileged to do this, for Redcliffe had two high-powered cars of his own, and it was seldom that he or any of his guests required the presence of George's antiquated Ford. But here he was, sweeping down the drive with the young mistress herself, and the triumphant grin on his broad ebony face showed that he was appreciative of the honor.

Redcliffe heaved his huge well-fed bulk out of

the chair and said: "Bless my soul!" three times and stared as though he couldn't believe his eyes. For it was typical of Karpeti that the telephone message had never reached him; besides, he was expecting his daughter and her fiancé to arrive from out of the skies. He had been slightly anxious at the delay because of the party he had arranged for that evening, but only slightly, for a party was always a party. He could stage another for Sandra, and any excuse for a party suited him admirably. He was an excellent host because he enjoyed his own parties more than anyone.

He hustled off the porch and was just in time to anticipate Peter in helping his daughter out of the car. He embraced her heartily, said: "How's the gal? How *is* the gal?" kissed her somewhere on the back of her neck, shook hands with Peter, thumped him between the shoulder blades so lustily that he almost lost his balance, and demanded to know what they were doing in that old scoundrel George's car? Peter explained briefly. Sandra was silent. Although she had outwardly recovered her composure she still felt considerably shaken within.

Redcliffe took them onto the porch. He asked them if they would care to go to their rooms first or have a cooler? He could recommend a planter's punch as hitting the right spot at this hour of the morning. It was almost noon, and the heat

hung like a shimmering drop scene in the humid atmosphere.

Peter accepted the offer of a planter's punch. Sandra said she would have a tomato juice. Redcliffe looked somewhat crestfallen. He was hoping that the year and a half since he had last seen his daughter would have made her more human. But apparently not. The drinks were brought by one of the native servants, and while they drank Redcliffe inquired solicitously about their adventure. Peter refrained from mentioning their mistake about Ashley, though he did say that Sandra had spent the night in his hut.

Redcliffe, unable to contain himself, chortled and slapped his fat thigh. "You don't say! You actually spent the night with Ashley Wood, my gal? My, my, you'll have all the women here wanting to scratch your eyes out and tear your hair out through sheer jealousy!"

"I didn't spend the night with Mr. Wood," Sandra contradicted, her face coloring despite herself. "I spent the night in his cabin. Mr. Wood left after dinner. He had an appointment."

Redcliffe looked his disappointment, then remembering that he was, after all, Sandra's father, he tried to change his expression.

"Quite right. Quite right. I always said that Wood was a gentleman, although there are few here who would agree with me. At least, who would agree he was that sort of a gentleman," he amended.

"Why, Father?" Sandra asked.

Redcliffe chuckled. "Well—ah—he's a bad lad. A bad lad, young Ashley Wood. Got all the women here running in circles around him. Even Felicité, blast her attractive little naughtiness." But he paused. His huge face reddened. Time enough to introduce Felicité into the conversation later. It was scarcely a topic he was looking forward to, and the actual sight of his daughter had not reassured him.

"Do you mean that although the women are—are very interested in Mr. Wood he is indifferent to them?" Sandra suggested in the pause.

"Indifferent to 'em? By Gad, he isn't!" Redcliffe slapped his fat thigh again by way of emphasis. "In the few years Ashley's been out here I should say he's had more flirtations than there are banana trees on my plantation. Women seem crazy about him. That poor gal, his secretary, she's got it bad."

"Do you mean that Miss Martin is in love with him?" Sandra asked.

Her father answered the question before he had time to wonder how his daughter knew of June's existence.

"Plain as the nose on your face. Nice little thing, and pretty too!"

"I should think that Miss Martin had far too much sense to be in love with Mr. Wood—or with any man who didn't reciprocate it," Peter put in. His voice sounded angry.

Redcliffe scratched himself behind the ear reflectively. "Well, I'm not so sure that he doesn't reciprocate—at least in a measure. It may even be serious. He *doesn't* flirt with her, and with men like Ashley that's always a good sign."

"You mean," Sandra suggested, "that if Mr. Wood—if he flirted with a girl he wouldn't care for her seriously?"

"Not a hope," her father retorted emphatically. "I should say that any girl who let Ashley kiss her easily was a fool. She'd be just another feather in his cap, and he'd forget about her almost the moment his lips had left her lips. But I hazard a guess that that little Miss Martin has been clever enough to have withheld her favors."

"I don't see why you refer to her as clever!" Sandra exclaimed with surprising heat. "She didn't strike *me* as clever. In fact, she appeared to me a very commonplace, unintelligent young woman."

"You've no right to say that, Sandra," Peter broke in, his own voice quite hot. "You don't know the first thing about her. You only saw her for a few minutes."

"And I suppose *you* think *you* know all about her?" Her voice was neither sweet nor in the least reasonable just then.

"Well, I do know a great deal more about her than you do," he insisted. "At least I should."

"But how can you know so much about Miss Martin?" Redcliffe asked in bewilderment.

"Oh, Peter spent the night with *her*," Sandra said.

"Lor' bless my soul!" Redcliffe spluttered.

"I spent it *in her car*," Peter said stiffly, emphasizing the last three words. "It was most kind of her to let me sit there. *She* seemed to appreciate the fact that it isn't very pleasant tramping about a strange, heathenish island all night!"

"Come, come," said old Redcliffe. "I am sure that wherever you two young people spent the night you both behaved in an exemplary manner." But his voice sounded tired. He was thinking how different were the young bloods of his own day. This modern trend of being so trustworthy might be all very well, but it seemed to take the spice out of life.

"Naturally, Father," Sandra said. "You don't, I hope, for a moment think I was accusing Peter of anything? If I didn't trust him as I trust you I should never have become engaged to him."

Perhaps it was a little unfortunate that at that moment a clear flutelike voice with a marked French accent should have floated out through the open porch doors.

"My Clifford. Where 'as my dear dear Clifford gone? Why 'as he run away from little Felicité?"

Redcliffe coughed; Sandra looked startled, and Peter interested. Almost immediately Felicité Perrier made her appearance, looking unhappily exotic in a vividly flowered taffeta house coat. It

emphasized the white blonde of her hair and her dark olive skin. She drew back a little when she saw Sandra and Peter, but a moment later she came forward in a pretty little rush, extending both her minute hands toward Sandra.

"Ah, *ma pauvre chérie*, so you 'ave arrived! Your poor papa, 'e 'as been distraught. All last night we look for you up in the sky. We scarcely sleep with fear for you, your papa and I." She swung round toward Redcliffe. "But why for you not tell me the *pauvre chérie* was 'ere, my Clifford?"

"I was going to introduce you after Sandra had had time to go to her room and tidy up," he said. "But now that you're here . . ." He sought in his mind for the speech he had so carefully prepared. "Sandra, my dear," he said with a pomposity that sat oddly upon him, "allow me to present Mademoiselle Felicité Perrier whom I have invited to stay here so that she can be a companion to you during your visit to Karpeti. My daughter Sandra, Mademoiselle Perrier." He bowed as he performed the introduction. Felicité gave a shrill giggle.

"But, my Clifford, 'ow fonny you are when you be'ave so dignified. I know the little Sandra and I shall be 'great friends, for we are of an age, as you say in this contree. *N'est-ce pas, ma chérie?*"

She took both the girl's hands and, raising herself on her tiptoes, implanted a kiss somewhere

on Sandra's chin. "La la, but she ees tall," she cried. "Tall and big and strong like her papa, eh, my Clifford?"

Sandra said nothing. Speech, for the moment, seemed to have deserted her. Who was this Mademoiselle Perrier, and why did she keep referring to her father as "my Clifford"? And what did she mean by telling her, Sandra, that they were of an age, when she must be at least thirty-five? An attractive thirty-five, and to Sandra's nineteen thirty-five was quite old. However, common politeness forced her to shake the little Frenchwoman's hand.

Presently Mrs. Lebrun, Redcliffe's housekeeper, appeared and took Sandra off to her bedroom. Mrs. Lebrun was an Englishwoman who had married a French husband and had spent her whole married life despising her husband's race. This characteristic did not make her feel kindly toward Mademoiselle Perrier, but since the job of Redcliffe's housekeeper was a very good one she had not so far dared jeopardize it by indulging too freely in criticism.

Sandra walked over to the big window that looked out onto the purple hills through which Peter and she had driven in the old Ford that morning. In the large, high-ceilinged room that had been built originally by the French settlers, she looked almost small. The sunshine flooded in about her through the wire screen. She realized suddenly that she was tired. Tired not only

physically but terribly, terribly tired in her mind. And this was a new sensation for Sandra Redcliffe.

"Mrs. Lebrun," she said with her back half turned toward the middle-aged Englishwoman, "how long has Mademoiselle Perrier been staying here?"

Mrs. Lebrun bristled. It was almost a heaven-sent opening, but she was a little afraid to take full advantage of it for the moment.

"Mademoiselle Perrier has been here about four weeks," she said, and her voice plainly inferred: "Four weeks too many."

"I see," Sandra said with an effort. "She seems very charming."

"As charming as a foreigner can be, I suppose," Mrs. Lebrun sniffed. "And of course it's very nice for *her* to stay here—almost necessary, from what I've heard, Miss Sandra; I mean financially—but though I know it's not up to me to express an opinion or to criticize your dear father in any way, I do think she has taken advantage of his kindness. But then don't all foreigners?" she added hastily, feeling that she might have said too much. "I am sure it is only a racial characteristic."

"You mean she was hard up—that's why she came to stay here?" Sandra asked.

Mrs. Lebrun hesitated and pursed her lips together. "Well, that was *one* reason. Maybe she had another, and maybe she hadn't. Of course I've no means of knowing the exact wiles of that

woman's mind, but I shouldn't put it past her to have considered the fact that your father is a widower and *rich*, Miss Sandra. I shouldn't put it past her at all. And she *must* know that people are gossiping like mad about her and Mr. Redcliffe. You'll forgive me, I'm sure, Miss Sandra, if I've said *too much*," she ended. "I shouldn't have said anything but for my high regard for your father—after all, I've been keeping house for him for five years now—and for you, Miss Sandra."

"Thank you, Mrs. Lebrun," Sandra said with dignity. "I quite realize that you have spoken only in my father's interest."

Mrs. Lebrun felt herself dismissed, hesitated, and left. When she was gone Sandra let her blonde head rest against the window frame. Her sense of weariness, both spiritual and physical, increased. She felt confused and for almost the first time in her life unsure of herself and what her future actions should be. On the journey she had almost brought herself to forgive Ashley the joke against herself. She had decided that it shouldn't interfere with their friendship and she knew that she wanted that friendship very, very much. But with meeting her father had come the shattering information that Ashley was little better than a common lady killer, a man who indulged in innumerable flirtations, and the type of man she had for years heartily despised. A man who would regard a kiss taken and given as a mere

feather in his cap. At the very thought not only her cheeks burned but her whole slim body burned. She had learned also that that obnoxious girl, Miss Martin, whom Peter defended so chivalrously, was in love with Ashley and that he might reciprocate it. Because, as her father had hinted, Miss Martin had learned the lesson of not making herself cheap. She remembered suddenly how she had followed him out onto the porch, and with a groan she buried her lovely flushed face in her hands. Was it possible to feel as she did and go on living?

And now had come this news from Mrs. Lebrun about the little Frenchwoman's unfortunate friendship with her father. People were talking. "Why on earth did he invite her here?" she demanded of no one, for no one was there. She went on speaking aloud: "But Father never has been capable of taking care of himself. That's why Grandma left all the money in my charge, I suppose."

Well, on this one point, anyhow, she was determined to justify her grandmother's faith in her. Her father should be rescued from Mademoiselle Perrier. Certainly the money should be kept out of her shapely but avaricious little hands.

But there was no opportunity of broaching the subject of Mademoiselle Perrier to her father that day. Sandra did not like to face the fact that he avoided a tête-à-tête with her, but his behavior left her little room for real doubt.

"Father," she said at the luncheon table, "I want you to take me all over the estate first thing in the morning."

"First thing in the morning? But, my dear, we're having this dance here tonight."

"But what has that to do with the morning?"

To old Redcliffe it usually had a great deal to do with it. After any sort of a celebration he rarely got up before noon, and after a dance at his own house he rarely got up the next day at all.

"Well—er—you might be a little tired, dear," he temporized.

"Nonsense," she said briskly. "Of course I won't be tired. I don't dance at all, and there is no need for anyone to dance beyond a reasonable hour. I always think midnight quite late enough for any party."

"Oh la la, then you 'ave a lot to learn, *ma chérie*," Félicité said, thrusting her attractive head forward across the table. "'Ere they dance all through the night. They dance; they drink; they make love; it is all very gay, *n'est-ce pas*, my Clifford?"

Mr. Redcliffe coughed warningly. Sandra, ignoring the Frenchwoman, turned back toward her father. "I shall be ready at eight, Father. I understand that out here it is better to get all the important business done before the noonday heat."

Redcliffe looked like a large disgruntled child, and Peter smiled. He regarded Sandra with

amusement but also with great affection. She was certainly going to put them all through their paces. He had been a little worried about her during the drive here from Wood's hut; she had seemed different, somehow, and he couldn't explain that outburst of tears other than that she must be very tired. But now she seemed to have come into her form again, and he felt relieved. He was looking forward to the dance that night. He was glad he was going to see that nice little Martin girl again.

Chapter 10

THE BALLROOM at Plantation House was another link that the original French settlers had left behind them. It was built on the generous lines along which they constructed their main rooms, with a high frescoed ceiling, an ornate frieze, and several imposing columns. One felt, entering this room, one was stepping back into the past; one could almost see sitting around the walls the plump, tightly corseted wives of the early French settlers with their powdered wigs and voluminous skirts. Twittering, gossiping women who brought the very smell of the French provinces into this exotic and unreal island. Here they had danced and scandalized until their despised black slaves rose up one night and murdered the lot of

them. But if actual blood had flowed in the ball-room of Plantation House—as very likely it had—it certainly did not shadow the gaiety that was apparent that evening. Redcliffe was known throughout the island as a host, and people came to his house intent upon enjoying themselves.

Sandra stood in the doorway with her father to receive their guests. Luckily she had brought one dinner dress in her suitcase; most of her luggage was being sent on by boat. It was a model gown of ice-blue slipper satin, severely cut with a high-necked tight bodice and very full in the skirt. It accentuated both her height and her blonde beauty. It made her look remote, unapproachable, an ice princess. That, at least, was how she appeared to Ashley as he stood in the far door watching her.

Three times during that afternoon he had decided not to come, and three times he had changed his mind. Indecision wasn't one of his characteristics either. He tried to excuse himself in that he was tired, having been up all the previous night; in that, since his conversation with Sir Hugo, he had a deal of work on hand, which was true, yet in his heart he knew that neither of these was the cause of his reluctance to climb into his white linen mess jacket and put in an appearance at Plantation House.

"You're scared of meeting that girl," he jeered at himself and added with an inward grimace: "And maybe you've cause to be at that."

June ended his uncertainty by asking him if he would escort her there, and he told himself he could not refuse.

Now watching Sandra standing beside her father, he felt glad he had come. It was worth having come if only to watch her. She was so beautiful. He felt a curious tightening of the muscles of his heart, a sensation he had not experienced for a very long time.

"Sheer physical attraction," he told himself. "She's a girl who might make any man's heart beat faster. Pity she's so inordinately stupid."

That thought gave him satisfaction and enough self-confidence to approach her. He bowed from the waist and was a little ashamed of himself afterward. It was not his usual approach to a lady.

"I see you arrived safely, Miss Redcliffe."

"Yes." Her voice was cool, even hostile.

"Quite safely, thank you."

"I'm sorry I didn't get back in time to say good-by to you this morning. I was occupied." A glimmer of humor came into his colorless eyes. "I did have that appointment after all."

He saw the color creep up to her temples—blood on ice, he thought—and for a moment he felt himself catch his breath. She was so very lovely.

"I don't doubt your word."

"But you did at one time last night, didn't you?"

The color crept higher. "I should prefer not to discuss last night, Mr. Wood. You saw fit to amuse yourself at my expense. I am sure you enjoyed the joke. I have been trying to see some humor in it myself all day."

"But you haven't succeeded?"

"Unfortunately, no."

There was a pause. The small native band at one end of the ballroom broke into a rumba.

"Do you rumba? Will your ankle allow you to?"

"My ankle is practically better, but I don't dance."

"You don't dance at all? Great heavens, girl, what have you been doing with yourself since you grew up?"

"There are other things in this world besides dancing, I hope."

"There are. Such things as playing tennis, playing golf, swimming. Such things"—he paused for a moment, and his pale eyes looked into hers and held them—"as making love."

Once again he saw her color. This time it was a cruel stain across her throat. He felt savagely glad one moment and sorry the next.

"Yes," she said in the pause, enunciating over-clearly, "I understand that is how you do occupy a great deal of your time, Mr. Wood."

His face slipped sideways in a grin. "Someone been telling tales out of school, or are you drawing your deductions from personal experience?"

"Both, Mr. Wood. I should be reluctant to believe what I have heard had I not had personal experience to substantiate it."

"Well," he said pleasantly, "since you have all that settled in your mind, supposing, since you don't dance, we stroll out into the grounds for a while?"

She could only stare at him. Any other man, she felt convinced, would have been completely flattened. But Ashley seemed merely to find what she had said amusing. "He can have no soul or no conscience," she thought bitterly. "Who can have been responsible for making him like this?"

Surprisingly she found it very pleasant to believe that someone had been definitely responsible for making Ashley into what he had become. She found it even more pleasant to believe it had been a woman. Men, she had learned from those romances of Ouida and Mrs. Henry Wood with which her aunt had regaled her, often went downhill very rapidly as a result of some unfortunate love affair. Even the best and strongest of them had this fatal habit of slipping when the woman they had idolized turned out to be all that she shouldn't be. Some such woman must be the evil shadow behind Ashley's life, she decided; it had embittered him, made him cynical, careless of the way he treated other women, taking as much as they would give him and then passing by. When she had first met him she had imagined that he needed rescuing from a life of indolence

and poverty. Now she realized with a bound of joy that he still needed rescuing—rescuing from broken ideals, from a horribly frivolous outlook upon life, rescuing, in fact, from himself.

“Very well. It would be nice to get some fresh air,” she said.

He was surprised not only by her acquiescence but by the change in her manner and was at a loss to account for it. But he led her through the far french windows which stood open. The tropical night was heavy. There was a feeling of a storm in the air. It might even be raging now behind those high silver hills. The stars were clear and overbright, too many stars. Sandra, looking up at them, felt they made her a little lightheaded and dizzy, almost as though she had drunk too much, whereas she had drunk nothing, not even a glass of the very excellent imported champagne her father was serving.

“I think I am going to like Karpeti despite everything,” she remarked presently.

“I don’t like that phrase ‘despite everything.’ Am I included in it?” he asked, his pale eyes twinkling.

“Not only you.” In the moonlight he saw a slight smile on her face. “Other things as well.”

“Certain things here have disappointed you?”

He saw her expressive face sober. “Well, yes.”

He thought he could guess. He felt suddenly sorry for her. Old Redcliffe should have arranged

it better than to have his recent flirtation brought so obviously to his daughter's notice.

"You don't like Mademoiselle Perrier, do you?"

He had his hand on her arm and he felt her start.

"How did you know?"

"Well, I'm not quite a fool. I know something about women."

"You mean you know a great deal about them?"

"Perhaps."

"You needn't boast about it!" Her voice sounded quite furious.

"My dear girl, I'm not boasting, I'm merely stating a fact. I do know something about women. I've made it my business to know about them."

"Yes, I heard that. But I still think it shameful you should boast about it."

"Why should it be shameful for a man to admit that he knows something about women? Considering that he will probably have to live more than half his life with one of them, he'd be a bit of a fool if he didn't, wouldn't he? If, for instance, you had to live more than half your life with an elephant you'd certainly be a fool if you didn't give both time and thought to studying the animal's habits, even his mental processes. I have never yet seen why a man should somehow be considered a nobler and finer creature merely because he wears mental blinkers where women are

concerned. I think it is up to men to study women just as women study men. If some of us didn't, it would give women a completely unfair advantage—and they take enough advantages, Lord only knows!”

Sandra was sufficiently intelligent to see that there was wisdom in what he said, although it was fairly shattering to her preconceived notions.

“To understand women doesn't mean that a man should treat them in a light, frivolous way or—or take advantage of them,” she pointed out.

“My very dear girl, you're not trying to tell me that any man *can* take advantage of a woman? Don't be ridiculous.”

“But it isn't ridiculous,” she argued. “It can and does happen. I *know* it can happen.”

“Through personal experience?”

She felt he had trapped her, but that strong streak of honesty in her refused to let her lie. “Well, yes,” she admitted in a very low voice.

She heard him chuckle, felt his hands on her shoulders, and found herself turned round to face him. “Listen, Sandra, my love—to call you Miss Redcliffe after last night would be ridiculous, wouldn't it?—listen, and listen very carefully. Don't get it into that lovely but quite foolish head of yours that I took advantage of you last night. I kissed you and you kissed me back, and at the time it was quite obvious you wanted to kiss me. You kissed me very sweetly, and I was fully appreciative. It was a very natural instinct that

made us want to kiss each other—even enjoy doing it once we had started. A very natural, healthy animal instinct. The desire was mutual; the pleasure was mutual. If you mean that because you thought you were kissing a beach-comber and not the first secretary of the British Embassy I took advantage of you, that is merely absurd. If I did enjoy a little joke at your expense where's your sense of humor?" He paused, and when she didn't reply he said a little sadly: "Poor sweet, I'm afraid you haven't got one, have you?"

She said slowly: "You don't think I have a sense of humor? Just what do you mean by a sense of humor?"

"The ability to laugh at oneself, chiefly," he said after a pause, smiling in the darkness. "To see the humor in one's actions just when one is imagining oneself most noble. To see humor, in fact, in almost every situation, particularly in unpleasant ones. No modern dictator has a ghost of humor or he couldn't possibly be a dictator. From what I've read of history, I've a shrewd suspicion that no reformer ever had a sense of humor either."

"I see," she said quietly. "And you think it important in a woman, a sense of humor? You would expect one—in your wife, for instance?"

"To live with a woman comfortably I should say it was essential."

"I see," she said again even more quietly.

He shook her a little. "Don't worry about it,

my sweet. A sense of humor doesn't enter into our scheme of things, for we are certainly not planning to live the rest of our lives together. Besides, I have something much more important on my mind at the moment."

"What is that?"

"A desire to kiss you," he said, and he did it.

Old Redcliffe was conducting an assorted group of his guests into the garden. He wanted to show them his new toy, a huge floodlight he had just installed, which lighted up the whole garden as though it were daylight. On his way through the ballroom he collected June and Peter who were dancing together.

It was a rumba. The third rumba since Sandra and Ashley had disappeared. June knew this. But it seemed twenty dances away instead of three. She was furious with herself. One should enjoy a dance when one has put on a new gown especially for it, and June's salary didn't run to many new gowns. Peter was a dear, and it was pleasant dancing with him, *but* There was all the difference between heaven and complacency in that "but." He, too, was distraught, though she was too full of her own thoughts to be aware of it.

Redcliffe laid a hand upon Peter's arm. "Come along outside, young fellow, I've something to show you all. You, too, June. Join the crowd. I feel like the Young Man from Cook's." He

chuckled. "Just a little surprise I've had installed in the garden."

It was a relief, June felt, to follow him and cease dancing for a while. Dancing can give one too much time for thinking, for realizing what a fool one is being. Peter, also, seemed relieved to stop. Redcliffe collected other couples in his progress through the ballroom, and before he reached the far door Felicité was hanging prettily onto one of his arms. The moon was temporarily hidden behind the storm clouds that had blown up over the hills. It was quite dark in the garden; even the brightness of the stars was veiled. Redcliffe was pleased. The darker the night, the more sensational would be the surprise he had planned for his guests.

He led them round to the side of the porch where the new switch was.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, imitating to the best of his ability the manner of a tourist guide, "now for my little surprise. One touch with my finger and the impenetrable darkness becomes day. Hey, presto!"

The darkness was gone. It *was* almost as brilliant as daylight suddenly. Far too brilliant for the man and the girl startingly revealed in each other's arms. Ashley and Sandra. Everyone in that group literally gasped and then talked rapidly to hide the embarrassment of the moment. Some of them had heard Sandra's small shriek and

Ashley swearing. They heard, too, Mademoiselle Perrier's laughing remark:

"Oh la la, that daughter of yours, she ees a fast worker, my Clifford!"

Peter came suddenly out of his stunned sense of shock to realize that June was no longer by his side. Obeying an impulse, he made off in the direction she must have taken. As yet he hadn't collected his thoughts or even tried to. Nor did he seem fully aware of the significance of what he had seen, what they had all seen. But he must find June. He had an instinctive feeling they must face this situation together.

Chapter 11

PETER found June without any great difficulty. She hadn't gone far. She had stopped as soon as she had control of herself. It was stupid to run away. What was there to run away from? Ashley had kissed Sandra in the garden, and inadvertently her father had switched on his floodlight at that precise moment. A number of people had seen, and those who hadn't seen would know in a very few minutes. But what would they think other than that Ashley had been caught kissing another pretty girl? He had a reputation for that sort of thing. There would be giggles and smirks

when the two of them appeared in public for a few days, but it would blow over very soon. Things in Karpeti did.

Then what was she so upset about? That the affair could have a deeper significance was ridiculous. She said the word through her teeth, "Ridiculous," and just then Peter caught up with her.

The moon had escaped from the storm clouds, and it was clear enough for him to see her face. He knew at once by her expression she resented his following her. And he knew why. She didn't want to talk about what had happened. She didn't want to admit it had any importance to him, to herself. Well, he didn't want to admit it either, but a queer sort of feeling in the pit of his stomach told him he had to.

"I—I wondered where you'd gone," he said. "Quite—a surprising little tableau, wasn't it?"

"Not so surprising in Karpeti. Or surprising anywhere at a dance." Her voice was definitely hostile.

"No—but Sandra doesn't dance."

"I don't see that that makes any difference."

But it seemed to him that it did, only he couldn't explain it to her.

"I'm sorry for her. She must be feeling pretty foolish," June said.

He defended quickly: "I don't see why she should. As you said, at a dance . . ."

And when he paused she broke in: "And

Ashley—he kisses a girl as casually as he puts on a clean collar each morning.”

“He’s not going to kiss Sandra like that.” Peter’s voice was dangerous.

“I forgot. She *is* your fiancée, of course.”

Her caustic tone made him say brutally: “And rumor has it you’re not disinterested in Wood.”

There was a pause. “No—and rumor’s quite right. I’m in love with him.”

“I’m sorry.”

Again the aggressive note was in her voice. “Why should you be sorry?”

“I don’t know, but—”

She broke in: “I shouldn’t presume to feel sorry for *you*. It’s absurd for either of us to feel sorry. You’re”—there was fear in her voice suddenly—“not going to take it seriously, are you?”

He said quietly: “Not unless Sandra wants me to.”

“But why *should* she? I’ve kissed men at dances without wanting anyone to take it seriously. Every girl has.”

He spoke out of his sure knowledge of her. “But Sandra hasn’t.”

“You say that because you’re engaged to her. I suppose it is nice *and* flattering to believe you’ve got a girl in a million.”

“But she *is* a girl in a million.”

She gave a small tight laugh; everything inside her felt tight; there seemed to be tight bands

across her chest and squeezing her heart. "You're certainly very much in love with her."

"Yes," he said quietly, as though stating an unassailable fact.

This time it was she who said: "I'm sorry." And she felt suddenly that she wanted to cry, to cry out her hurt and her fear for the future. But to cry might defeat her argument, and she must make him believe what had happened wasn't serious.

"I've loved Sandra ever since she was a child. She was different from other children even then. Much more intent, much more serious, and in many ways much more honest. I think I told you last night all my life I've been terribly afraid for her. She is so vulnerable." His voice suddenly broke.

"But she has to grow up sometime," she said. She couldn't sympathize with him in his feeling about Sandra. "And growing up is always a painful process."

"I think she has grown up now," he said.

"Then you've nothing to worry about," she said again. "She'll regard the incident as any other girl would—with faint embarrassment tonight and amusement in the morning."

"Is that how you're going to regard it?"

Again that marked hostility was in her tone. "Of course."

"I congratulate you." He half turned. "I think if you'll excuse me I'll go and find Sandra."

She wished she could think of something to say to prevent his going. Once the necessity of making light of the situation to him had gone all her own fears would return. The unusual quietness of Ashley all that day and the way he had said in speaking of Sandra, "She's sweet."

Peter found Sandra in her room. He searched through the downstairs rooms first. Ashley was leaning against the bar, a rum and soda in his hand. He was chatting and laughing. If he was putting up a front he was certainly doing it very successfully. Peter stood a moment watching him, and his hands clenched by his sides. *He* couldn't have behaved like that if Sandra had kissed him, no matter what the circumstances. Suddenly he realized that she had never kissed him of her own free will, and his resentment against Ashley grew.

Sandra let Peter in when he knocked. He saw there were tears in her eyes and impulsively he stepped forward as though he would take her in his arms. But she drew back.

"I'm sorry, Peter."

"Hell," he said explosively, his nerves jarred. "Everyone keeps saying I'm sorry! It *was* unfortunate. But a kiss at a dance never means much, if anything." He forced a smile. "Don't be afraid I'll play the heavy-handed fiancé."

He knew he was talking like June, trying, as she had tried, to make light of what had happened.

"I know you wouldn't, Peter." She smiled at

him, real sweetness in her smile. It tore at his heart, and again he moved forward as though under compulsion to take her in his arms, but again she evaded him.

"Then"—he cleared his throat—"no harm's done. I want you to come downstairs with me, Sandra. I want people to see us together. It will stop them talking."

That seemed to be a new thought to her. "You think they will talk about Ashley and me?"

"Oh, come, Sandra, there's bound to be some gossip."

"I hadn't thought of that."

"You hadn't thought of that? Then why—why are you up here?"

She said quickly: "You think I came up here because—because I was ashamed?"

His good-looking face colored. "Not ashamed; dear. I've just been trying to tell you there's nothing to be ashamed of. We all give way to these very human and fleeting impulses on occasion. A kiss given and taken before one realizes what is happening. There's no need for any of us to think any more about it. Of course I expect you were embarrassed, and that's why you came up here."

She shook her quite lovely head. "It wasn't that, Peter. Though I can understand why you should think it. And it was awfully kind of you to come and want to take me downstairs with you. Awfully kind."

He burst out, unable to control himself, "But, Sandra, I love you!"

She looked at him, and it seemed to him that she was looking at him in a curious way, and he saw the tears come into her eyes again. "Do you, Peter? I thought you respected me and liked me. I thought we got along well together, were interested in the same things. . . . Isn't that it?"

He shook his head. His voice was thick. "No, that isn't it, Sandra."

She bent her face in her hands. He was by her side again. "My dear, my dearest, what is it?"

She said in a muffled voice: "I didn't understand, Peter."

"What's there to understand?" His voice was harsh again with fear.

She didn't reply, and in the pause he asked, because he had to say something: "Why did you come up here then, Sandra?"

She dropped her hands. Her face was tear-smudged, but to him it had never looked more beautiful. "I came because I was happy," she said.

He stared at her, then he swung sharply away and crossed to where the heavy curtains had been drawn against the night. He fingered one of them absent-mindedly. The fear was right up in his throat, choking him. It was no longer a fear; it was a certainty. But no sooner was it there than his mind rejected it. Sandra had been carried away. She didn't know her own mind.

He controlled his voice when he spoke.

"Can't we leave this discussion until morning? As I said, I want you to come downstairs with me to stop people talking."

"I don't want to go down again. And I don't mind if they do talk."

"But I mind, Sandra."

She had come up behind him. He felt her hand on his arm, a gentle, pleading hand. "Try not to mind too much, please, Peter."

His hands clenched tighter. The knuckles were white. "You don't mean that, Sandra." The words were jerked out of him. "I won't let you mean that—now. You don't know—you haven't had enough time—perhaps if I went away on that expedition I'm planning for a few weeks..."

"It won't make any difference, Peter."

"But you can't respect and like Ashley! Why, you've just met him. You haven't a thing in common. No mutual interests."

Her voice had a dreamy quality. "Those things don't matter." And when he was silent she repeated more insistently, "Do they, Peter?"

"No, I don't suppose they do."

There was another pause. He still felt the pressure of her hand on his arm. It seemed to be trying to say something further to him. As though he resented the message of her fingers he shook his arm free of her hand. "Then you're not coming down with me?"

"Not tonight, Peter. I—I don't want to see people—and it isn't because I'm afraid of their

gossip. Please believe that. As I said, I don't care—but I just don't want to go down. I"—her voice softened perceptibly—"want to be by myself."

"All right." He strode toward the door. He looked back over his shoulder before he let himself out.

"Good night, Sandra."

"Good night, Peter dear. . . Please forgive me."

"I can't help myself, Sandra," he said and was gone.

Chapter 12

ASHLEY left earlier than he usually left a party, though not noticeably earlier. He hadn't danced after he came back into the house. He stood propped against the bar, drinking one rum and soda after another, but they didn't seem to have any effect upon him. Men drank with him. Some hit him across the back and laughed boisterously; others laughed slyly and said: "Ashley, you dog!" He grinned back, his face slipping sideways as it always did; he was apparently completely unperturbed, but June would have noticed; had she been there, that each time his eyes seemed to grow a little paler. Most men's eyes

darkened in anger, but Ashley's seemed to turn paler.

He found June presently and said: "Don't let me interrupt your good time, but I think I'm set to wander homeward."

For him to speak of her "good time" was so fantastic she almost laughed aloud. Not only hadn't he danced with her all evening, but since that miserable episode in the garden she had scarcely seen him.

She said with a grimace: "I think I can tear myself away."

He smiled. "As bad as that?"

"*You* should know." But she wished she hadn't said that a moment afterward. "The trouble with you is that you haven't any pride," she thought, kicking herself mentally.

"All right, if you're ready I'll meet you on the porch," he said and went off to make his adieus to Redcliffe. An awkward business in the light of what had happened. Redcliffe, though a lad himself, was, after all, Sandra's father.

"Thanks for the party. It was a grand party, sir," Ashley said.

In normal circumstances Redcliffe would have dug the younger man in the ribs and said: "You young devil, but we caught you nicely, didn't we?" He looked as though he would like to have said it then, but parental responsibility got the better of him.

"Unfortunate incident in the garden, Ashley."

"Most unfortunate, sir."

"Humph." Redcliffe cleared his throat as though at a loss. "Don't let it occur again," he said and felt somehow that wasn't the thing to have said.

"I won't," Ashley said with feeling.

June found him silent on the way home. She knew she should have left things as they were, but she couldn't.

"Pity old Redcliffe went a bit gay with his spotlight."

"Oh yes."

This wasn't in the Ashley Wood tradition at all.

"I always said your sins would find you out one day, my lad."

"But divine justice needn't have made *her* suffer for them."

"Why should she suffer? It will be a good advertisement for her. Other men are sure to be interested in a girl Mr. Ashley Wood selects for his kisses." She knew she was being beastly, but she couldn't help herself.

"You haven't a very nice nature tonight, have you, my pet? I can only hope that you're jealous."

"Why should I be jealous?" she scoffed. The remark wasn't grade A, and she knew it unhappily.

"Well, I hope you're not," he said quietly, and she felt worse than ever.

She said presently in an altered voice: "It

wasn't anything really. Things like that do happen in Karpeti, as I explained to the fiancé."

"Oh, so you explained things to the fiancé? Rather interfering of you, wasn't it, my love?"

Her face turned scarlet, and her sense of wretchedness increased a hundredfold. But she said defensively: "Well, someone had to explain things to him."

"I don't quite see why."

"He's a serious-minded bloke. He might have suggested pistols at dawn."

Ashley said: "I might have welcomed that. There's a lot to be said for pistols at dawn. It settles things so neatly."

"Yes, but you might have found yourself with the girl on your hands."

"I might," he agreed, and because he said no more and because of the jagged state of her nerves she suddenly felt like screaming at him.

He drew up before the Fleurie, and she prayed with her fingers crossed that he would say something to reassure her that nothing had changed as a result of tonight, but he didn't. The sleepy-eyed porter let her in, and she climbed up the stairs to her room. She lay for a long time on her bed, not attempting to get undressed and not crying. She felt too tired and discouraged even to cry.

Sandra was ringing for her breakfast at seven the next morning. She hadn't forgotten she had

arranged for her father to take her around the plantation at eight. But when she got downstairs he wasn't there. He was still asleep. She sent a message for him to be awakened, and while she waited she sat on the swing seat on the wide porch and looked over the countryside. The landscape with its high hills creeping down to the sparkling blue water looked at its best at this hour, and she had again that feeling of exhilaration she had had on the previous morning, only it was intensified. Ashley wasn't coming to breakfast, but he would come later that day. They had said only a few words after her father had dramatically switched on the spotlight.

"This is where we use our famed nonchalance." Ashley smiled after he had finished swearing softly.

"They all saw you kiss me," Sandra said, stating the obvious.

"Yes, it was unfortunate."

She said quietly: "I'm not sure that it was. It rather settles things, doesn't it?"

He didn't know what it settled, and he was a little afraid to ask her. "Don't you want to go in and powder your nose?" he suggested instead.

"Yes, I shall go to my room. We have to think many things out, haven't we?" she murmured.

Again sheer cowardice prevented his questioning her. It was then he had said that he would come and see her the next day, and at the time he had meant to.

Sandra, sitting on the swing seat, went over that conversation, and since she was essentially romantic she imagined into it all sorts of satisfying words and innuendoes that hadn't been there. The truth was she had fallen in love with Ashley, and she had done it in that intent, dynamic, and wholehearted way she did everything. She had fallen in love with him suddenly and inexplicably, as people do fall in love much more often than some people would have us believe.

Redcliffe appeared presently, looking bleary-eyed, disgruntled, and unshaven, but some of his ill-humor vanished when he saw his daughter. She made such a lovely picture sitting there on the swing, her fair hair glistening in the sunlight, her skin so fresh and clear, her blue eyes sparkling. He felt proud of her and proud of himself for having begotten her.

"I am sorry to have got you up, Father," she said sweetly. "But I do want to go round the plantation and I have a great deal to do today."

"Well, we may as well start out at once and get it over," he said. "I've ordered breakfast when I return."

It was impossible, of course, to travel over more than a small portion of the plantation. Sandra was interested in everything. Her father explained to her that a bunch of bananas was called a stem and that each banana was called a finger. The branches were cut when all the bananas were green and shipped abroad. They

ripened on the boat and were ready, on reaching their destination, to appear immediately on English or American breakfast tables. Bananas meant to Karpeti what oil wells meant to Mexico, or coal and steel to Britain. Taxes levied from the companies who had concessions built what roads there were and made far too many politicians rich. Presently he took her through the small village where the workers lived. Their huts were mud and thatched, painted white, and, considering their mud floors, surprisingly clean. It appalled Sandra that most of these huts consisted of only one room, that here men, women, and children, not to mention the family's domestic pets, lived, ate, and loved. She decided she would have to do something about it, but only vaguely. It was odd, but her zeal for reform seemed to be diminished that morning. She even remarked that they all looked surprisingly happy.

"Why shouldn't they be?" old Redcliffe said. "They lead natural, primitive lives. It's civilization that worries people and sets all sorts of odd complexes working."

"You mean," she suggested, "if you let yourself do natural, primitive things you're much happier?"

Her father was about to agree wholeheartedly when he remembered the incident of the previous night.

"I shouldn't say it was *always* true," he began when she interrupted:

"Oh, but I'm sure you're right, Father! I admit I didn't think so until recently, but I do think you're right now."

"You've changed your mind lately?" he asked a little anxiously.

"Yes, I have. And I"—her lovely face flushed—"am much happier since I have."

He coughed and scratched his head and decided he'd better let that pass. "You mustn't pay too much attention to that Ashley Wood," he said awkwardly. "I warned you yesterday he was a bad lad."

"You're wrong, Father. He's merely misunderstood."

He looked taken aback. "Did he spring that line on you?" He felt disappointed in Ashley. It was such an old line, even he had discarded it.

"No, of course he didn't! He's fearfully brave about all that has happened to him. He hides his hurt under a mask of cynicism. But every now and then his real nature breaks through."

"I shouldn't set too much store on his real nature," Redcliffe observed dryly.

"You misjudge him, Father. But then everyone out here does."

There was a pause. They had turned their steps back toward the house. Redcliffe was thinking of his breakfast. A nice slice of iced papaw—it was always an excellent thing the morning after—and some strong black coffee. Sandra said suddenly:

"What should I do to acquire a sense of humor, Father?"

Redcliffe stopped dead in his tracks. He opened his mouth and closed it again. He said at last weakly: "But don't you think you have a sense of humor, dear?"

She shook her head. "I don't think I have, but I should like to have one."

"Your grandmother hadn't," he observed sadly.

She seemed to see daylight. "Was that why she left all the money to me instead of to you? I believe, if one has a sense of humor, one can laugh at unpleasant things. But she didn't laugh about your escapades, did she, Father?"

"She didn't," he said with feeling.

"But I'm going to laugh at everything in future. I'm even going to *try* and laugh at Made-moiselle Perrier."

He looked startled. "You think that will be difficult?"

"Well"—she smiled—"she is rather exasperating and unnecessary. At least she seems so to me."

"Perhaps you're right," he said. "But the poor gal has had a hard time. Chased out of Paris by the Nazis, the brutes. Not a happy experience."

"No," she agreed. But for once she felt a slight sympathy with the Nazis.

Félicité appeared at lunch time wearing the flowered taffeta house coat that was so exotic.

Sandra couldn't help feeling it slovenly to appear at lunch time in a house coat with a very obvious chiffon nightgown showing beneath the hem. She felt glad that Peter wasn't at lunch. He had left a written message that he had gone over to the other side of the island with a mechanic to see to his plane.

After lunch old Redcliffe disappeared and left the two women together. Sandra suggested that Felicité would soon be going home.

"*Chérie*," said the little Frenchwoman sadly, "I 'ave no 'ome. My lovely, lovely 'ome was taken from me by the Nazis."

"I *am* sorry," Sandra said. "Are you going from here to the States?"

"Why should I? I am very 'appy 'ere. I t'ink I stay."

"You mean in Karpeti? Yes, it *is* nice here. Perhaps you are thinking of taking a house of your own?"

The Frenchwoman, who had been reclining in a hammock on the porch, raised herself to her elbow.

"But whyfor? Your dear papa, he say he is very 'appy to 'ave me 'ere."

"Yes, but—" Sandra began. She felt nervous, at a loss. All the same she was determined to say what she meant to say.

"My father *has* been very charmed to have you," she resumed. "And, I suppose, while I am here it is all right, but when I go if you stayed

but Ashley. She had but to close her eyes to feel his arms about her again, his lips on her lips. She sat there on her bed, staring out of the window, her whole being poised on tiptoe, waiting. . He would come. He would come soon. He had said he would come that afternoon, and it never occurred to her that he wouldn't come.

Chapter 13

THAT Ashley didn't come was not entirely his fault. Sir Hugo kept him in conference until quite late, then there was the matter of a report to dictate to June, and then he felt too completely tired even to remember that he had promised to call upon Sandra that afternoon. Heavens, but he did feel tired! The last three nights he had scarcely slept. Two nights he had lain beside that disused warehouse waiting for something to happen, and last night he had been upset as a result of that wretched incident in the garden. He could still cheerfully have brained old Redcliffe, though he didn't suppose it was his fault. After all, he couldn't know that he, Ashley, should have selected that precise moment to kiss his daughter.

It was a shame for the girl. There would be a minor scandal, he supposed, but, after all, a

kiss in Karpeti could constitute only a very minor scandal. He hoped the fiancé wouldn't cut up rough, but he had seemed, from what Ashley had seen of him, quite a decent sort of fellow.

He looked into June's room. She had just finished typing his report.

"You'll be late for your dinner," he said.

She looked up with a smile. "So will you."

He sat on the edge of her desk, swinging a leg. "I'm not going to bother about dinner. I think I'll go straight to bed. But I'll drive you home first, or have you your car?"

"Alexander simply refused to start this morning, so I left him in the garage."

He got to his feet. "Come along then."

It was a dark night. The storm which had threatened yesterday and hadn't actually come seemed to be blowing up again. The moon was hidden intermittently behind scudding clouds. The mountains behind Princeville, usually soft purple in the day and silver at night, looked grim and forbidding. A sharp wind whipped the hair back off June's forehead as she took her place beside Ashley in his car. "Looks as though witches were abroad tonight," she remarked.

He smiled faintly. "It's just the sort of night the natives love. It panders to their superstitious natures. They'll see all manner of things tonight, three-horned goats, dogs with no legs

chasing headless cats. Voodoo is very much in the air."

"I try to laugh about all their silly voodoo superstitions, but sometimes I can't quite," she remarked slowly.

"No." His voice was grave. "One should never laugh about anything other people believe in intensely. Nothing *believed* in like that is ever entirely foolish. There is such a force in belief, you know."

She felt a slight shiver run through her, but perhaps that was because the wind was quite cold. "I think you're right, but I wish I didn't," she said.

As Ashley turned his car out of the embassy drive June heard another car start. It must have been standing just outside the gates. She turned her head and saw that it was a black limousine. She saw, too, that it was following them.

"I wonder who's in that car?" she said. "And what was it doing parked outside our gates?"

"Search me," he said. "Maybe some of our staff are courting."

"Yes, but why should their car be following ours?"

He chuckled. "Maybe they just happen to be going the same way we are. Did that occur to you, Miss Sherlock Holmes?"

"Well, it's just penetrated," she said. She turned her head and smiled at him.

She never knew afterward whether it was at

that precise moment or a few seconds later that a piece of glass suddenly flew off the windshield. "What——" Ashley began. But he got no further. June heard the second shot faintly, and at the same moment the car swerved madly, crashed into a hedge, and Ashley slumped over the steering wheel. June was thrown out, but onto a soft bank. She picked herself up just in time to see the big black car turn and drive rapidly in the opposite direction. She ran over to their car, shook Ashley, crying wildly: "Ashley darling, darling, are you hurt?" He straightened, shook his head, and muttered: "What the devil's happened?"

"I think someone fired at us. You're not hurt, are you?" But she realized as she said it that her hand which was grasping his shoulder was wet and sticky.

"You've been shot." She stated the obvious.

"I suppose that was what knocked me out for a moment, but I'm all right now." He tried to get up as he spoke, but he sank back again, muttering: "Lord, but I am weak. How stupid!"

"I must get help." But as the words left her lips two men came running out of the house into whose hedge they had crashed. The house was owned by the American bank manager, Mr. Williams. He came first, with old Redcliffe, who had dropped in for a drink to escape the somewhat uncomfortable atmosphere at his own house, closely following him.

"There's been an accident," June cried. "Can we take Mr. Wood into your house, Mr. Williams? He's been shot."

"Lord bless my soul, she's right!" old Redcliffe exclaimed, startled, while Mr. Williams murmured: "Come into the house, Wood. I'll telephone Dr. Saunders."

June almost fainted, once they got into the brightly lighted hall, at the sight of Ashley's coat. The blood had seeped through the pongee silk of the shoulder and run all the way down the arm. She cried out sharply and would have run to him, but Mrs. Williams, who had appeared a few moments before, put a restraining arm about her and led her into the drawing room, where she insisted June drink a stiff brandy and soda. Mr. Williams came in presently to say that the wound wasn't serious, but it had splintered the bone; that was why Ashley had lost consciousness for a moment. Dr. Saunders would take him back to his hotel and see that he got safely to bed.

He coughed and added: "Oh, and by the way, Maud, Wood doesn't want anything said about this. I said I thought it was a matter for the police, but he was most emphatic that nothing should be done about it. I don't blame him, in a way. The police here are precious little use, if any."

June was suddenly remembering what Ashley had said the previous morning in his hut.

"A hit on the bean on a dark night is a very effective silencer." Well, it hadn't been a hit on the head but a shot fired from a black limousine. She felt icy cold, and her heart seemed to stop beating.

She saw him for a few moments before Dr. Saunders took him back to his hotel. He was making light of it, saying: "Some drunken fools of natives shooting at random." But he winked at June, and she almost burst into tears. Someone was out for Ashley's blood. This time they hadn't been successful, but supposing next time . . . ?

Redcliffe regaled his family with the incident at dinner that night. The chilly atmosphere which prevailed between Sandra and Felicité and which had driven him out of the house before dinner was still there, even stronger. He wondered what was the matter with Sandra, and if she was still fretting over that incident of last night. But if she was it would blow over. Redcliffe had the happy philosophy that most things in this life, especially unpleasant ones, blew over if you didn't pay too much attention to them.

Only with a great effort of will power had Sandra come to the dinner table at all. She had been suffering the pangs of disappointed love, and that these pangs were new to her didn't make them any the less intense. Most girls, be-

fore they have reached the age of nineteen, have tasted the awful humiliation of being let down on a date, but Sandra hadn't. Chiefly because she had never had dates with young men; she had been too occupied with her studies. Her aunt's old-fashioned romances combined with Peter's devotion had helped her to believe that the age of chivalry was still with us and that no man who was a man ever broke his word or left a lady to languish for his society.

It had been a new and shattering experience to find herself watching the clock as the minutes crawled by, to jump to her feet each time the telephone bell rang, to feel her whole body go stiff and rigid each time there was the sound of a car coming up the hill outside their drive. By dinnertime her sense of letdown was so awful that she threw herself down on her bed and started crying weakly, and if she hadn't had some remnants of pride she wouldn't have faced the dinner table at all.

Peter came back a few minutes before dinner was served. He looked tired and grim, but he told them that the mechanic's report about the plane had been, on the whole, optimistic. The man would arrange to get it back to Princeville, where he thought it could be repaired.

"But it's bound to take a week or ten days," Peter said. "That will about give me time to take a little jaunt into the interior and collect a few specimens to take back to the museum with

me. Prof Wilson would never forgive me if I came back empty-handed."

"But, Peter, you're not thinking of going back soon?" It was Sandra speaking. Her voice was surprised and afraid and almost relieved. The relief was unconscious, but it was there.

Peter knew it was there. The grim lines about his nicely shaped mouth tightened, and his dark brown eyes which were capable of holding such devotion darkened in pain.

"Yes, I shall have to be going back soon," he repeated. "I knew in the beginning I couldn't stay long, but now——"

He looked across at Sandra. Something in his look tore her out of her absorption in her own disappointment. Instinctively she moved toward him. "Oh, Peter dear." And then she stopped, confused. But she felt her heart swelling and she felt terribly, terribly sorry for him and terribly sorry for herself at the same time. "But I don't want you to go so soon," she said.

"*Ma pauvre* Sandra 'as ze large 'eart. She seems to 'ave room in it for everyone!" *Made-moiselle Perrier* remarked cattily.

Sandra swung round toward her, her face crimson. She who had always prided herself upon her control over her emotions felt suddenly as if she had no control over them. It was with difficulty she restrained herself from actually hitting *Félicité*.

Luckily her father appeared at that moment,

and simultaneously dinner was announced by Antoine, the colored butler. It was while they were waiting for the roast that Redcliffe told them about the shooting incident. He had just said: "We heard what we thought was a shot when Williams was mixing the drinks, but we didn't pay much attention until we heard what was like a car crashing into the hedge and then a girl screaming. We rushed out, and, bless my soul, if it wasn't Ashley Wood slumped over the steering wheel, blood all over him, and a bullet lodged in his shoulder." He paused for dramatic effect. He prided himself upon being a raconteur, and he liked to excite and startle his listeners, but even he could not have anticipated the effect he would get.

Sandra started obviously when he mentioned Ashley's name. She turned deathly pale, and just as Redcliffe paused for his effect she slipped quietly and unobtrusively under the table.

Her father stared at the spot where his daughter had been sitting, his eyes almost popping out of his head. Peter pushed back his chair and dived after her. Felicité looked intrigued and chagrined. There had been many times when she would like to have fainted, but she could never quite pull it off.

Sandra had recovered consciousness by the time Peter had rescued her from under the table. When he tried to throw water over her face she cried "Don't" sharply and sat up.

"Father, Ashley isn't seriously hurt? You said he'd been shot and there was blood all over him. Oh, Father . . ."

"There, there, don't excite yourself," Redcliffe interrupted. "It isn't serious. Williams sent for Dr. Saunders, and he fixed him up and took him home to bed. Shoulder may be painful for a few days and put him out of the giddy social whirl. But listen, Sandra, I don't understand. Aren't you feeling fit? What do you mean by falling under the table and giving us all a scare?" He was blustering to hide his anxiety. What on earth had caused the girl to faint? Had it been the mention of blood? But, dash it all, girls weren't so lily-livered these days.

Fortunately a few minutes later he was able to put all worry from him. Sandra seemed more cheerful than she had been all afternoon. In fact, more cheerful than he ever remembered her. She laughed and talked. She was almost garrulous. "For a moment I thought it was hearing about Wood," he told himself. "But it can't have been. She's as right as a trivet now. She can't be seriously interested in the fellow, thank heavens."

He was wrong, of course. The shock of hearing that Ashley had been shot, perhaps even killed, had caused Sandra to faint; but now that she knew that his injury wasn't serious she was not only intensely relieved, but she was full of the joyous sense that what had happened ex-

plained the fact that he had broken his word and not come to see her. She told herself he had been on his way to see her when the accident had occurred. She chose to forget that her father had said the Martin girl had been with him.

Peter, who was a young man of perception and great sensibility, didn't misunderstand. He went for a short walk around the house after dinner. He felt tired and wretched and wished there was someone he could talk the situation over with. He thought of June, but she was ruled out because he sensed she would have little sympathy with Sandra, and although Sandra had hurt him more than he had ever thought any girl could hurt him, he still wanted to help her and protect her and see that she was happy.

When he came back to the house after having smoked almost half a packet of cigarettes—though he hadn't actually smoked them; he had merely lighted one after another, taken a few puffs, and then flung them down on the drive—he found Sandra alone in the drawing room. Redcliffe had gone to his den to smoke a cigar, and Felicité had made some excuse to chase in there after him.

"Feeling all right now?" Peter asked as he came in through the french window from the porch.

"Yes, of course. It was awfully stupid of me. I hope I didn't worry you."

"What's the decision, Sandra?" he asked abruptly. "I think I'd like to know something definite before I hurl myself into the wilds on a reptile hunt."

"Peter, do you think you ought to go?" she asked anxiously. "It might be dangerous."

He smiled quietly, not happily. "It won't be as dangerous as a tiger hunt. And isn't a tiger hunt the recognized vocation of a rejected lover?"

"There aren't any tigers in Karpeti," she pointed out practically. "And I should say that a snake would be far more dangerous, especially if you let it bite you."

"Even for you, my love, I don't think I shall let a snake bite me if I can avoid it."

She was looking at him in a puzzled way, her lovely brow puckered, her blue eyes large and rather tragic. "You mean you are going because of me, Peter? Because I—" She paused. "Oh, Peter darling," she burst out unexpectedly, "I feel such a beast!"

He came over and stood in front of her. He put out a hand and let it fall on her shoulder. "You look very beautiful even if you are a beast," he said, his voice a trifle unsteady. "Thanks for the 'darling.' I think it's about the only time you have ever called me darling. I take it that means we write *finis* to our engagement. Do I congratulate Wood, or am I precipitating matters?"

She stammered, her face flushing violently. "Oh, Peter, not yet! I mean, nothing is settled. And, anyhow, I don't know . . ." He waited, but she didn't go on. He had held his breath as he waited, a hope welling up in him, but it didn't materialize. His hand fell from her shoulder. He turned away. "Let me know if I can do anything for you, Sandra, ever," he said.

"Oh yes, Peter, I will. You're my best friend. You always will be my best friend."

"Oh no, I won't be. But it's nice of you to think I will be. I'll try to live up to your conception of a best friend for the present, anyhow."

Chapter 14

ASHLĒY was in bed in his suite at the Grand Hotel and most resentful. He chafed at bed at the best of times, and now that he had more work on hand than he cared to think about it was insupportable. But Dr. Saunders had called at the hotel that morning, examined the wound, put his arm in a sling, and forbidden him to venture out of the hotel, even out of his bed, for two days at least.

"You're safer here, anyhow," he commented. "Some native has probably got a down on you,

and when they're in a bad mood they're devils. Stop at nothing."

Ashley privately agreed that whoever had fired that shot would stop at nothing, but he didn't believe it had been a native. That was another reason why he wanted to be up and doing. No man commits murder, or attempts it, without a strong incentive. He must have stumbled onto something even more important than he had at first imagined.

June came in at lunch time. She still looked white and shaken as a result of the shooting incident, but when he told her she should be at home in bed she assured him she was perfectly all right. Since he suspected that it was chiefly on his account she was upset, he didn't press the matter. He knew she was in love with him, but he didn't want to have to face that thought at the moment. Time enough for that, he told himself, when the job he had taken on was done. She was the dearest girl, and he had meant what he had said to her that night on the steps of the Fleurie Hotel. He believed that nothing had altered since then. He was determined that nothing had altered since then.

When Sandra was announced by one of the boys he was going through some papers June had left with him. He hadn't time to analyze his emotions or to know whether he was more pleased or annoyed. But the moment he saw her standing at the foot of his bed, looking quite

entrancingly lovely, he knew he wasn't annoyed. He was a little alarmed to realize that his chief emotion was something quite different.

She was wearing a blue linen coat and skirt, perfectly tailored, and a mauve scarf was twisted turban-effect about her blonde head. The high-necked silk blouse she wore was mauve too.

She smiled down at him in a sweetly serious way, her blue eyes dark with compassion. "I heard you were wounded," she said. "I'm awfully sorry."

"You make me feel as though I were dying and you were a visiting royalty. Would you demean yourself, madam, to shake hands with me before the end?"

"You would naturally make light of it. That's like you."

"You'll make a blasted hero out of me yet, won't you, Miss Redcliffe?"

"The night before last you said that it would be ridiculous to call me Miss Redcliffe. You called me Sandra."

"The night before last was the night before last," he pointed out literally.

"You mean you feel differently now?"

"Not altogether, but the circumstances are different."

"I don't quite see how."

He explained with exaggerated patience. "The night before last a dance was in progress.

We were wandering in a moonlit garden, and sweet music was being wafted to us on the breeze. I had, incidentally, had one or two drinks. Besides, I had every intention of kissing you. Now there is no dance in progress; there is no music; thanks to my doctor, I have had nothing to drink all day, and I have certainly no intention of springing out of bed and kissing you."

"That's a pity," she said.

He didn't believe he could have heard her correctly. He propped himself on his elbow and cocked his head on one side.

"What did you say?"

"I said it was a pity you had no intention of kissing me."

"Yes, I thought you said that."

"Because," she said bravely, "I'm going to kiss you."

He stared at her as though she had taken leave of her senses. Then he said hoarsely: "You're going to do nothing of the sort!"

"I am," she said, smiling down at him through tears which had suddenly gathered in her eyes. "Just to show you that moons and dance music don't make any difference to my feeling for *you*. How could they, Ashley?" As she spoke she came round to the side of his bed. She leaned over and kissed him on the forehead. She would have kissed him on the lips with any encouragement, but he didn't give her any.

He said weakly: "You're more like visiting royalty than even a good film."

"You say that because you have a sense of humor, don't you?"

He groaned aloud. "Miss Redcliffe, Sandra, or whatever you want me to call you, you are quite impossible."

She said: "But you don't think I'm impossible."

"No, I don't," he said, and he pulled her down on the bed beside him. He held her close with his one good arm and he kissed her lips, not once but several times. He hadn't meant to do this, but there are times when every man does things he has no intention of doing.

When finally she straightened herself she smiled and said: "That settles everything, doesn't it?"

He said: "I don't see that it settles anything at all."

"But it does," she replied, smiling sweetly and reasonably. "It proves that your feeling for me is just the same as my feeling for you. You said the other night that it was a very healthy, natural instinct that made us want to kiss each other. I agree with you. And I am sure one is much, much happier when one gives in to such instincts. It is, I am convinced now, the only sensible basis for marriage."

Ashley had a feeling as though the blow on

the head he had been anticipating had actually come.

"What did you say?" he asked feebly.

"Your hearing doesn't seem very good today," she remarked practically. "I wonder if it's a result of your wound. I said I was sure that the mutual desire we have to kiss each other was the best possible basis for marriage."

"But look here," he said, sitting straight up in bed and feeling that he had to say something definite and quite decisive. "You're talking a lot of nonsense, you know. That we have, as you phrase it, a mutual desire to kiss each other has nothing at all to do with marriage. Marriage is something quite different. You yourself told me so the first night we met. Marriage, you said, if I remember correctly, was built on mutual liking, respect, and interests in common."

"Did I say that?" she remarked, smiling faintly, a little wistfully even, as though she were looking back on a far-distant childhood.

"You certainly did," he said belligerently. "Then what do you mean by saying the reverse now?"

"One can change one's mind," she pointed out. "Most intelligent people do."

He could not deny the truth of that. He merely said flatly: "We couldn't possibly marry. It is quite out of the question."

"Why? Is it because of Miss Martin?"

He swallowed something in his throat. "June

doesn't come into it. If she had never been born I still couldn't marry you. Besides, what about your fiancé?"

"Peter? Oh, that's off."

"*It's off?* But—but why?" He was stammering slightly. He added, his voice grown anxious: "He didn't get angry about what happened the other night?"

She said with a quiet dignity that put him in his place:

"He didn't get angry. He was very marvelous about it. Peter is a wonderful gentleman."

"Then don't you think you should reconsider and marry him?"

She said after a slight pause, her lower lip beginning to tremble a little: "Are you trying to tell me that you don't like me? That you didn't really want to kiss me just now?"

"I'm not. I did want to kiss you. I should like very much, in fact, more than anything I can think of, to kiss you again."

"Then that's settled," she said again mad-deningly.

"But," he went on as though she hadn't spoken, "a kiss is *not* marriage. There is every reason why I should want to kiss you, but every reason why I should hate to marry you."

"That is not at all sensible," she pointed out sweetly.

He could have shaken her cheerfully. She not only had an answer to everything, but she

did not seem in the least perturbed by his flat refusal to marry her—a refusal that should have sent any normal girl out of his room in haste, angry if not hurt. He had an awful feeling that he might as well be talking to a blank wall for all the notice she had taken of his refusal. He felt she was regarding him as a small unreasonable boy, but one who will be persuaded to the logic of what Mamma is saying before very long. It made him want to get up and strangle her, yet he knew if he so much as laid a finger upon her he would only kiss her again.

"I'm *not* going to marry you," he repeated and felt he was actually behaving like a bad-tempered small boy. "But I do appreciate the honor you've done me—please don't think I don't—Miss Redcliffe."

"Has the fact that I haven't got a sense of humor anything to do with it?" she asked presently and quite humbly. "But really I'm learning to have one. I'm trying hard, and one can accomplish anything with a little practice and patience, you know."

Ashley groaned, this time audibly. He felt a choking sensation in his throat and a grittiness behind his eyes, and he knew he had never been nearer to tears or nearer loving a woman in his life. She was such a child, and now all her superior mental qualities only made her seem more of a child. He felt that same urge to protect her that Peter felt, only he knew that the

person he must protect her against was himself.

"Look here, we'll leave a sense of humor out of it," he said. "That's not the main obstacle. There are literally hundreds of obstacles—you must understand that—but the insurmountable obstacle is the fact that you are Miss Sandra Redcliffe, one of the richest girls in the world, and I am merely the first secretary at a quite unimportant British Legation, that I have no money of my own apart from my salary, that everyone would despise me and say that I'd married you for your money. I'd come to despise myself and feel like a pet poodle or something, and in time you'd come to despise me too. I don't know if I've made myself clear, but that's what I mean."

"I see," she said quietly.

At that moment Dr. Saunders bustled into the room for his evening visit. Sandra was introduced, then she took her leave. Ashley couldn't tell from her face just what effect his last speech had had upon her, but surely, he thought, she could no longer persist in her nonsense.

Chapter 15

JUNE noticed Mr. Redcliffe's big green sports car parked outside the embassy drive as she left

the next afternoon. She wondered what it was doing there. But no sooner had she wondered this than a young man who had been slumped low in the front seat sprang out, and she saw it was Peter.

"I wondered if you'd let me drive you home," he suggested. "I have borrowed mine host's car, as you see."

She smiled at him. "I always prefer driving to walking. I'm not one of those athletic females, thank heavens. Alexander, my car, is temporarily out of commission."

He opened the door for her, and she climbed in. He took his place beside her. "Do you mind if I don't drive you straight home? It's a lovely evening, and those hills look rather inviting in this half-light. Do you know of any place up there where we could get a drink and something to eat?"

She hesitated. There was Le Cabaret. But last time she had been there she had been there with Ashley, the night he had kissed her on the steps of the Fleurie and said, half jokingly, half seriously, that if he met no one he liked better he might marry her. It had been a wonderful evening, but it was silly, she told herself, to hang onto sentimental memories, so she told Peter about Le Cabaret, and he headed the car in that direction.

Redcliffe's high-powered, expensive car went up the hill like a bird, but she didn't comment

on it out of loyalty to Alexander, who puffed and sported and behaved like the venerable old gentleman he was at the mere sight of this hill.

"How is your fiancée this evening? I suppose she is otherwise engaged, and that's why I'm honored with your society?"

"You've got it all wrong," he said. "I don't think Sandra is doing anything, and she has nothing to do with why I called for you. Incidentally, she is no longer my fiancée."

She said: "What?" in a rather faint voice and stammered: "You mean the engagement is broken?"

"That's what I do mean."

"But how silly. How absolutely stupid! You mean you let a little thing like the kiss you saw Ashley give her in the garden upset you?" She sounded genuinely furious. "I—I didn't know any man could be such a fool!"

"Hey, hey," he said, really startled. "I don't see why *you* should be so mad about it. I don't want to be rude, but I don't see, either, what my broken engagement to Sandra has to do with you."

She gulped back a fresh outburst of anger and took herself in hand. "I know it has nothing to do with me," she said coldly. "But I do think it silly to let a trivial thing like a kiss given at a dance break up an engagement."

"But if the kiss had been trivial it couldn't

have broken the engagement, could it?" he remarked quietly.

"You mean you don't think the kiss was trivial?"

"That's what I said."

She felt quite cold, and suddenly she was desperately afraid, though she wouldn't admit it. But even if Peter was stupid enough to take that kiss seriously, *she* wasn't going to.

"I think I know Ashley better than you do," she remarked shortly. "He'd kiss any girl at a dance so long as she was pretty enough. It wouldn't mean a thing to him. I told you so the other night."

"Unfortunately how Wood feels doesn't concern me."

"Your fiancée took it seriously?"

"I'm afraid she did. And, as I've pointed out, she is no longer my fiancée."

"But why do you let her be so ridiculous?" she stormed. "Even if she's as dumb as they come where men are concerned *you* might at least put some sense into her head!"

"I don't appreciate your reference to Sandra," he said, angry himself. "And it isn't true. I've thought lately that Sandra knows a great deal about men—at least, about getting her way with them."

Again that awful cold feeling gripped June's heart. But Ashley wouldn't fall for a girl like that. Not seriously. He couldn't!

But the terror of the thought that he might made her cry out loud: "But you're not going to stand calmly by and *let* Miss Redcliffe make a fool of herself over Ashley? Nothing could come of it. She'd only get hurt. If you've got any decent feeling you'll do something to stop it!"

"I don't quite follow your reasoning," he said. "And if Wood means Sandra's happiness, I shouldn't want to interfere."

"You mean you haven't got any guts," she raged. "If you had you'd take her away somewhere, abduct her in that airplane of yours, see that she doesn't make a mess of her life and your life, his life and—and——"

"I think you mean *your* life, don't you, Miss Martin?" he said in the pause.

"Yes," she said, slumping back in her seat suddenly. "You're right. I told you the other night I was in love with him, didn't I? I told you, too, I hadn't any pride. That seems to be true." She gave a small, mirthless laugh.

"You're wrong," he contradicted. "You've plenty of pride, but the wrong sort. Denying a definite fact is always the wrong sort of pride—even when that fact is that you're in love with someone who is in love with someone else."

But she wouldn't let him get away with that. She almost fought him with her fists. "If you even *think* that Ashley is in love with Miss Redcliffe you're mad," she cried. "She may be in love with him—or think she is—but I'm not going to

have you throw Ashley to the lions, as it were, for the sake of your blasted ex-fiancée's happiness! He *isn't* in love with her. I know he isn't. And I'm darn well not going to be bamboozled by you into thinking he is!"

At that moment they arrived outside the door of Le Cabaret. A liveried colored porter sprang forward to open the door, and the interval of being ushered in and shown to a table gave them both time to cool down.

"Supposing," Peter suggested when their drinks had been brought together with salted nuts and olives and a platter of sandwiches, "we lay off both Sandra and Wood for the moment and see if we can enjoy ourselves? The experiment might be interesting."

She agreed reluctantly. Her thoughts were so full of what he had told her and the possible significance of it to herself that she didn't believe she could ever put it out of her mind; but presently, rather to her astonishment, she found that she could. The drink warmed her and made her feel that things might not be quite so bad; the music at Le Cabaret was always excellent; there were both a native and an American orchestra; people began to arrive, and the atmosphere became informal and jolly.

Besides, she liked Peter. Even though she was furious at his absurd attitude about Sandra and Ashley, she liked him. He was sensitive and thoughtful for others and very nice-looking.

One thought of an anthropologist, even a young one, as being dry as dry, but Peter managed to be quite good fun. She knew he was rich, almost as rich as Sandra was, and she wondered why he bothered to do any work at all, but she respected him the more because he did. She found herself asking him about his work and taking a genuine interest in what he told her. It was difficult to get him to talk about his work at first, for on every other subject but Sandra he was an essentially diffident young man.

Peter found himself expanding under her sympathetic interest. He felt she was a very intelligent girl, though her intelligence was a very different brand from Sandra's. She was much more worldly. But he did not like her the less for that; in fact, it made her easier to talk to. He liked watching her when she talked, seeing the way her small animated face lighted up, watching the expressions change in her clear gray eyes, seeing her largish mouth tremble in laughter and her nose tilt up ever so slightly more. She was pretty. A very comfortable prettiness.

He, in his turn, questioned her about herself and was shocked and horrified to find out how very alone she was in the world. Her parents were dead, and although there was an uncle in Scotland he had married again and his new wife did not care for her. He gathered she had no money apart from what she earned. All this distressed him, for he had been surrounded by

family and protected by wealth all his life, and he hated to think of any girl whom he liked having to battle along on her own.

They had food and danced. June pointed out to him various residents of Karpeti and told him funny stories about them. She made a face when she mentioned Herr Schmidt, who was dancing with the daughter of the Spanish minister. She had just finished giving Peter a very unflattering account of the thin, tight-lipped German when, on his way back from the dance floor, Herr Schmidt paused at their table. He bowed to June and said in his careful, precise English:

"I hear that my friend, Mr. Ashley Wood, has met with a slight accident. That is most unfortunate. I hope it is not serious?"

"No, it isn't serious. He should be up and about tomorrow."

Her tone discouraged further conversation, but the German did not take the hint. "Mr. Wood is sometimes a little rash, is he not?" he remarked. "It is not a detriment for a young man to be rash so long as his rashness does not involve him in affairs that should not concern him. Good evening, Miss Martin." He bowed stiffly from the waist again. "Convey my regret to Mr. Wood—and my message—won't you?"

Peter said after he had gone: "Well, he's a queer customer. I suppose it's his lack of knowledge of English, but he managed to make that quite simple message sound rather omin-

ous. . . . Why, what's the matter, Miss Martin?"

"Nothing," she said. "But I—I don't feel very well. Would you mind awfully driving me home?"

He was disappointed. He found he had been enjoying the evening more than he had imagined he could in the circumstances. But little Miss Martin did look tired and rather pecked suddenly.

"Of course. I'm awfully sorry you're not feeling up to scratch," he said and added sincerely: "It has been a jolly evening. I've enjoyed myself, anyhow."

Sandra found her father alone in his den after dinner the next evening. Felicité was enjoying a slight indisposition in bed. Old Redcliffe had his feet on his desk and was smoking a cigar. A bottle of rum and a siphon of soda stood at his elbow. He was reading a French novel with a lurid title, but when he saw his daughter standing in the doorway he sprang to his feet, spilled the ash of his cigar down his waistcoat, upset the glass at his elbow, dropped the novel, and at the same time said heartily:

"Come in, Sandra. Come in, my gal. Nice to see you here. Sorry if I walked out on you after dinner, but there's something about the atmosphere of the drawing room that depresses me."

That wasn't strictly true. Old Redcliffe had retired to his den because he sensed an atmos-

phere. All through dinner Sandra had looked very determined, as though she had something weighty on her mind, and her father was a little afraid that that something weighty might concern himself.

"Father, I want to speak to you," she said. "I've come in here so that we're not interrupted."

He tried to look pleased. "Sit down, dear. Sit down and fire ahead." Mentally he reviewed all his recent sins and shortcomings, all his extravagances which, since she controlled the purse strings, Sandra might consider unnecessary. He hoped she wasn't going to attack him about Felicité again. Poor girl, how could he turn her out after the terrible way she had been treated by the brutal Nazis?

"I have been interviewing a lawyer all afternoon, Father," she said. "A Mr. Munson. Mr. Williams, the bank manager, recommended him. I am arranging to turn over my entire fortune to you."

"What?" said old Redcliffe. He began to doubt both his ears and his senses. He sat bolt upright and stared at his offspring.

"Yes," she said quietly. "Apparently it is not so difficult as I would have imagined. I shall turn over the entire interest on the capital to you for your lifetime. I shall not turn over the capital itself because you know, Father, you might do something foolish with it."

Redcliffe admitted the possibility. He was in such a state of mental whirl he would have admitted anything.

"I shall allow you to make me a *small* allowance, at least for the present," she informed him sweetly. "Enough to clothe myself, but that is all. After all, he can't very well object to *that*."

"Who's objecting to what?" he asked, as though he were coming up through deep water after nearly drowning.

"Oh—ah—ah—I was only thinking aloud, Father," she stammered, and she blushed vividly. It made her look so lovely that even her father was impressed.

"You're sure you want to do this, dear?" he asked presently in an uneven voice. "It's very kind of you although the money *should* have come to me before you, anyhow. But that wasn't your fault. But I can't quite understand what prompted you to do this now."

She smiled slightly as she rose to her feet. "Perhaps it's the sense of humor I've developed, Father."

Chapter 16

ASHLEY'S FIRST PUBLIC APPEARANCE after the shooting incident was at the evening reception which Sir Hugo gave at the embassy. It took

place a few nights later. He had his arm in a sling, and most of the ladies in Karpeti decided that it made him look more romantic than usual. Men could never understand what women saw in Ashley. He was too tall; his features were irregular—his face was crooked, anyhow, and when he smiled it became even more so—his hair was straight and nondescript; it passed for light brown; his eyes were of no definite color and curiously pale. But they knew that their wives, sisters, and daughters would rather dance with him than any man in the room.

Sandra came with her father and Mademoiselle Perrier. Peter had gone off on his anthropological expedition the previous morning. He had gone on horseback and taken a guide and a servant and two boys to look after the pack mules. He had left Sandra a detailed plan of his proposed route "in case you should need me." He said this more hopefully than with any conviction.

Since Sandra's luggage had not yet arrived she had to appear again in the ice-blue dinner gown, a fact which annoyed her. That it did was surprising. Formerly she would have turned up at a reception in a gym tunic without being conscious of it. Sir Hugo bustled forward to welcome them. After chatting with them for some time he said:

"I'll get hold of young Wood. He'll get you some refreshments." He was faintly startled at

the vivid scarlet which came into Miss Redcliffe's cheeks.

But Ashley was occupied with other guests, so he had to fall back upon young Williams, the bank manager's son.

Sandra, who had scarcely lived through the afternoon through sheer breathless anticipation, had difficulty in concealing her disappointment. These last few days she had felt she was floating through air; she had felt reborn and a much, much better person. She had felt everything every girl feels when they first fall in love, and because of her nature she felt it more intensely than most girls do.

June was there, but she was busy. Since the reception was at the embassy she was by way of being a hostess and in charge of the refreshments. She had supervised the decorations, which were charming, masses of red and scarlet flowers in white bowls against the plain creamy walls. The grounds were lighted softly with Japanese lanterns, and there were tables of drinks and refreshments out on the wide porch. There was an orchestra, too, and one of the rooms had been cleared for those couples who wished to dance. Ashley danced with his left arm about his partner's waist. Since he was an excellent dancer it made little difference.

Sandra, standing with her father, Mademoiselle Perrier, and young Mr. Williams, saw him dancing. She saw him dancing with this girl and

that girl, his face slipping sideways as he smiled down at them. She felt, had she had a pistol in her hand, she could cheerfully have shot each one of his partners, but her anger against them was not so great as her hurt against him that he hadn't come up and spoken to her.

She could not understand it, for, feeling as she did about him, she could not or would not understand that he did not share her feeling. And when she remembered just how he had kissed her, not once but on three separate occasions, she could understand it even less. Since it was not in her nature to fret about anything without trying to do something about it, presently she murmured an excuse to her party and set off in search of him.

She found him standing on the porch, propped up against a support, drinking a rum and soda. He had just deposited the fat daughter of the Brazilian minister into the vacant seat beside her mother. He felt he had earned his drink. Señorita Alonzo had trod on his toes and breathed garlic at him. He needed a drink for another reason. His resolution to leave Sandra strictly alone needed bolstering up. He told himself he was terrified of her after that scene in his room. It was all quite absurd, even worse than absurd; it was humiliating. But he knew he had been conscious of her standing there every moment he had been dancing; he had been conscious of each expression that had passed over her lovely face;

he had been all too conscious of how very sweet her lips had been each time he had kissed them.

He had just decided that he wouldn't go back into the ballroom but would remain out here and talk to some of the men, when he felt a hand on his sleeve and heard her voice say: "Ashley."

He straightened and turned his head slowly. "Hello, Miss Redcliffe."

Her lower lip puckered. "We'd agreed it was to be Sandra."

She saw him smile, and for a moment her heart seemed to stop in her breast.

"Very well, Sandra."

"You haven't asked me to dance."

"But you don't dance."

"I might try. I might also walk in the garden."

"Gardens can be dangerous," he pointed out.

She, too, smiled. "I'm willing to risk it, Ashley."

There was nothing for it but for him to take her out into the garden.

"I've been expecting you up at Plantation House," she said as they walked.

He murmured something about being busy.

"It doesn't matter," she said. "I wanted a few days to think things over myself. Or rather to arrange things."

He thought it best not to ask what she meant. Anyhow, she told him.

"About my money, Ashley," she said. "When you explained to me that it was an insurmount-

able barrier to our marriage I realized you were right. I saw your point of view, that a man does not like his wife to have much more money than he has, that his friends might despise him, and he might end by despising himself. It all sounded very sensible, and I was glad you felt that way."

He cleared his throat. "I'm gratified you see my point. It does make things rather impossible, doesn't it?"

"It *did*," she corrected. "But, you see, that state of things no longer exists."

"Nothing can alter the fact that you're one of the richest girls in the world."

"Not any longer. I have turned my entire income over to my father. And"—she even smiled at him—"you can't be so small-minded as to punish me simply because I have a rich father!"

"You've turned all your money over to your father?" he exclaimed. "But why?"

They had both stopped walking. She turned to face him.

"I had to after what you said the other night. That my money stood between us. Do you think I'd *want* my money if it kept us apart?"

"You must be talking nonsense!" he said.

"No, why do you keep saying that?" Suddenly she stamped her foot; her cheeks were flushed; there was a slight break in her voice. "Ashley, you must believe I'm serious. I love you. I think—I'm sure you love me. Everything you said that first night was so very true—every-

thing about the rightness and beauty of mutual attraction. I've felt it; I've *known* it every time you've held me in your arms and kissed me since. I'm not ashamed of it. I'm proud of it—so proud I'm even telling *you* I love you."

He said: "You make me feel like crying, Sandra. It's all so hopeless."

"But it isn't hopeless!" she cried. There were tears in her eyes and in her voice too. "How can you say that? You may think it stupid of me to have given away my income, but I don't care. I'd do anything to make you happy, to make you happy with me. I never knew love could be like this—could hurt so much. . . ."

"Didn't you? My poor little Sandra, you have a lot to learn," he said gently. He put his hand on her arm and held her to him. He felt her slim body trembling. "I do love you," he said. "But that doesn't in the least alter my decision that I'm not going to marry you. I might even be willing to marry you if I didn't love you. But as I said the other night, there are so many obstacles between you and me, it would make me tired telling you them. Enough to say that you are not my sort and I am not your sort and we'd never be happy. It would be hell, my darling, my very dear, and though I might put up with the hell and even think it was, in a way, worth it, I would die a thousand deaths knowing you were going through the same hell. It is useless, your arguing, or your pretty lips trembling, or your lovely

eyes entreating me. I know my own mind, and I am quite, quite certain I am not going to marry you."

"Ashley, you don't mean that. I can't let you mean that! I"—she found suddenly she was swaying in his arms—"can't let you live without me, for I can't live without you!"

"You can," he said, "and you must. After tonight you must forget all the things you have said to me and all of the things I have said to you. After tonight you will be Miss Redcliffe to me, and I shall be Mr. Ashley Wood to you. After tonight we shall not exist for each other . . . my darling."

He held her closer and he kissed her. He kissed her eyes, her lips, and her throat, but gently. He kissed the tears that were still in her eyes and on her cheeks.

"I'll never give you up," she whispered. "Never, Ashley."

"The gods have written that you must," he said. All the same he kissed her again.

It was later that same evening at the champagne banquet the British taxpayers were giving to the Karpesian politicians, their daughters, and their wives, by way of a bribe that went under the name of hospitality. Sir Hugo, presiding at the head of the festive board, was in great form. He looked even more like Santa Claus. He was making a speech, and as he made it he presented

compliments to the women as though they were priceless gifts he was taking from an imaginary sack on his back. He got very red in the face, chuckled at all of his own jokes, and repeated most of them twice. At the end of the speech he said:

“And now I have an announcement of *special* interest. It concerns two young people for whom I have a great affection and a very high regard. In fact, since they work here under my roof I feel almost as though they were my own children. I refer to my right-hand man and the first secretary of our embassy, Mr. Ashley Wood. It gives me the *greatest* pleasure to announce his engagement to Miss June Martin, whom you all know and love and who also works here. . . . I ask you one and all to raise your glasses and drink their health. I give you Miss June Martin and Mr. Ashley Wood and their lifelong happiness.”

There were cheers and applause, and very few people heard the glass crash. A glass held by one of the women guests—a tall fair-haired girl in an ice-blue gown. Only those nearest her heard her mutter: “It can’t be true. It *can’t* be true!” Very few people saw her get up suddenly and leave the room. June saw her go. Ashley saw her go too. He had been watching her, and her only, ever since Sir Hugo had started to make the announcement.

Chapter 17

MEN do strange things for love. Ashley asked June to marry him that evening because of his love for Sandra. It wasn't logical, but nothing about love is very logical. He asked June to marry him because he felt cornered, even desperate, and almost for the first time in his life unsure of himself.

He had come upon June shortly after that scene in the garden with Sandra.

She smiled at him faintly. "Hello, Ashley."

A note in her voice made him say: "Tired, June?"

"A little. Everything's ready for supper when Sir Hugo gives the word. I hope he doesn't hold it up too long. Luella's getting jittery."

Luella was a Jamaican native, a wonderful cook, but temperamental as all good cooks are. Sir Hugo had brought her from Kingston with him. He had come to Karpeti shortly after his wife's death.

Ashley and June were standing together on the lighted porch, and for the time being they were alone.

"He'll give the signal shortly. He's talking to Mrs. Williams now, and she always bores him."

"You sound tired, too, Ashley. You've been

having a heavy evening from the look of things—pushing around the fat daughter of the Brazilian minister and giving the American millionairess a little fresh air.”

He smiled slightly. “You’re not very subtle, darling. You noticed, did you?”

She said through her teeth: “Sometimes I could hit you, Ashley.”

“Poor sweet”—he sighed faintly—“it’s not going to be pleasant for you having a husband who reads you so easily.”

The pause was sharp, almost breathless. She stammered: “I don’t know what you mean—do I?” Her heart was in her throat. The world was standing still, quite still.

“Don’t you? I think you do. We talked of getting married once. A trifle vaguely, perhaps, but I’ve been thinking lately it mightn’t be a bad idea. What are your present thoughts on the subject?”

She thought: “This can’t be happening. He can’t be actually *saying* this.” She was afraid to move in case it was a dream and she should step right out of it.

He came over and put his hands on her shoulders. “Look at me, June. It’s not a very great decision after all. People talk a lot of rot about marriage, about the gravity and seriousness of it. I think it’s a toss of the dice, a gamble at best, and like all gambles one can’t say how it’s going to turn out until the wheel is spun. Ours might

turn out well, or it might turn out pretty damnably. Are you willing to chance it?"

"Yes, oh *yes*, Ashley."

Her eyes were shining in the moonlight. There were tears in them. He turned his head aside. He didn't want to see those tears. They reminded him of tears he'd seen in another girl's eyes, and he didn't want to think of those tears. Or of anything about her. The feel of her in his arms. The sweetness of her lips. The dear stupidity of her thinking that he, Ashley Wood, could marry a millionairess, or even a millionaire's daughter. "But it isn't only the money," he thought. "Blast it, I can't be so petty as that!"

No, not only the money. The life she'd expect him to lead. It was too late for him to reform, and he couldn't bear a woman he loved to be disillusioned in him. June knew him for what he was. She wouldn't expect a miracle—or even want one.

He heard her say with a half-broken laugh: "Are we engaged, Ashley?"

He turned back toward her; his hands dropped from her shoulders. He put them in his pockets and stood before her, grinning faintly. "That's up to you, June."

He heard her draw a deep breath. "Then we *are* engaged."

"Good girl. That's settled then."

There was a moment of embarrassment. They were both aware of it. June thought wildly,

ecstatically: "I'm engaged. I'm engaged to *Ashley*." She couldn't think of anything else. It was only afterward she remembered he hadn't said he loved her. And when she did remember it she wouldn't let herself think about it. She couldn't.

"What does one do?" he asked to break the silence he didn't like. He was afraid of it.

"Do?" There was her laugh again, the broken, breathless laugh. "You—you might kiss me."

"I might." But suddenly he found he didn't want to. It was absurd. A kiss was nothing in his life. One kissed girls casually and forgot it the moment one's lips had left theirs. But he didn't want to kiss June casually, and he couldn't kiss her as he had kissed one other girl. That kiss was too recent.

But she kissed him. She put her arms about him and kissed him and tried to believe the impulse had been his, not hers. There was a cough, and there stood Sir Hugo beaming at them. It would never have occurred to him to withdraw. He fed on others' romances.

"Well, well," he chuckled, rubbing his plump hands together, "you young people enjoying yourselves, I see."

"Sir," Ashley said, "I have the honor to present to you my fiancée."

"You don't say!" said Sir Hugo. "I *am* glad. I can't say how glad."

"Poor boy," he was thinking, "a bit of a *mésalliance*. A nice little girl, but she's only a

stenographer." But nothing of this appeared on his face—that was one lesson the diplomatic service had taught him.

"Thank you, sir."

"And you, June"—he took both her hands—"I can't say how happy I am. A kiss is in order, eh? Yes, a kiss *is* in order."

Sir Hugo kissed women on any pretext, no matter how slight, but oddly the pretext had to be there.

"Why not announce it tonight?" he suggested, thinking that this would give a fillip to his speech. Everyone loved a romance, and it would catch the women's attention. It couldn't fail to since it concerned Ashley.

She turned a radiant face toward the younger man. "Oh, Ashley, do you think it's too soon?"

"Of course it isn't," Sir Hugo answered for him. "Nothing connected with marriage is ever too soon. The engagement, the wedding, the babies—damme, don't think me indelicate, but there are such things as babies, you know." And he chuckled delightedly at his own daring.

Ashley said with a wooden face: "If you wish to announce it tonight, Sir Hugo, I'd be obliged."

"Oh, Ashley!" He felt June's hand creep into his, and suddenly he wanted to fling it from him. He wanted to dash off the balcony out into the night. He wanted to get away from everyone—most of all from himself.

"Come along in then, both of you," Sir Hugo said. "It's about time we should be starting supper."

Sandra knew the moment she had left the supper room she shouldn't have gone. She had acted impulsively. The age-old instinct of a desperately wounded creature to hide. She stood just outside the door she had closed sharply behind her, closed it upon the applause, the murmurs of congratulation, upon that hideous crowd of people who *knew*. She felt they knew, anyhow, every one of them, knew about Ashley and her and her love for him.

But it wasn't hurt pride she was suffering from. Pride would have forced her to stay. It was as though someone had given her a knockout blow in the stomach. She was sick and wounded. She was even a little lightheaded with shock and despair.

She didn't know how long she stood there. She didn't know what she intended to do. She found she was standing in the outer hall. It was only a short walk to the front door, but she couldn't move. The murmur of good wishes in the supper room was swelling as the toast was drunk. Ashley and Miss Martin. Ashley and Miss Martin. No, no, *no*. Sandra had an awful fear she must have cried it aloud as her jangled, throbbing nerves shrieked their protest. Ashley

and Miss Martin . . . How *could* that be? Less than an hour ago he had held *her* in his arms. He had said: "I love you, Sandra." He had kissed her, and she had kissed him back. Had he been engaged to Miss Martin all the time?

But it was too early for that thought to torture her. The shock was still too physical. The door opened. She moved aside automatically. It was Mademoiselle Perrier.

The little Frenchwoman was angry. She said in a hoarse whisper: "Do you want to make yourself ze laughing stock? Yes, and your poor papa too. Zey see Ashley kiss you zat night, and now when his engagement is announced you run from ze room. You American girls I do not understand. 'Ave you no pride?"

"No," Sandra said.

Félicité shook her. "You act like someone who 'as been 'it on ze 'ead. What is Ashley Wood to you zat 'e 'as not been to so many other women? A kees? But so many of zem 'ave keesed him. Yes, 'ere in Karpeti. Do not be a fool, girl. You must come back; you must smile; you must tell zem you are very, very 'appy."

Sandra looked at her. "You make me want to laugh," she said.

"Well, laugh zen," Mademoiselle Perrier said irritably. "Laugh—do not stare at me like zat, as though you 'ad 'ad mooch, mooch too mooch champagne. Listen, they come now from the

supper room. We will go to the cloakroom, you and I, and then we go back and smile and give our congratulations."

"I am going home," Sandra said.

"You are *not*," Felicité said, shaking her again. "You 'ave your *pauvre* papa to consider. He live 'ere, does he not? You do not want people to say his daughter 'ave made a big fool of 'erself."

Sandra looked at her almost in amazement. Did such things matter? When you were dead, or your heart was dead, did what people said or thought really matter? But Felicité seemed to think they did, and there was her father to consider.

She allowed herself to be dragged along to the ladies' cloakroom, to have rouge put on her cheeks, lipstick on her lips. She didn't feel it was happening to her, any of it. She felt she had ceased living when Sir Hugo had made his incredible announcement.

"Perhaps not so many people 'ave noticed," Felicité murmured in her ear when they were on their way back to the reception rooms. "Everyone, zey look at the 'appy couple. Now smile, *chérie*, and keep saying you are very, very 'appy."

They had stopped to speak to someone. Sandra said: "Yes, it's very good news. I'm very happy about it."

"Fancy Mr. Wood *settling down*," the woman they were speaking to retorted. "A regu-

lar ladies' man, wasn't he? A trail of broken hearts behind him if ever any man had! You didn't know him very well, did you, Miss Redcliffe? Still I'd *heard* you'd met him. Wasn't he at the dance your father gave for you?"

"Yes," Sandra said. "Yes. He was there."

"She-cat!" Felicité muttered as they turned away. "They are all like that 'ere. So few people—and 'ow they 'ate each other!"

"Ah, there you are, Sandra," old Redcliffe said, mopping his forehead. "What happened to you at suppertime? Get a pain or something?"

Felicité trod hard on his toe. "You are ze big fat fool, my Clifford."

"Hey, what's all this?" he began, but a look from her stopped him. He said instead: "Shouldn't we be hitting the homeward trail soon?"

"Yes, very soon. But first Sandra and I go to say to Mr. Ashley Wood and Miss Martin 'ow very, very pleased we are." She gripped Sandra's arm more firmly and steered her through the guests to the little group where June and Ashley were standing. June was smiling, her gray eyes shining, her small arm tucked through Ashley's. Ashley, too, was smiling, but his eyes were cold.

Cold . . . until he saw Sandra being propelled by Mademoiselle Perrier toward them. They changed. Even his smile changed; it became crooked, defensive.

"It is just lovely," Felicité said to both of

them. "I am so 'appy for you. Love"—her voice softened—"it ees all ze world, is it not?"

"It is all the world," June repeated and smiled in quite a friendly fashion.

It was wonderful how friendly she felt toward all women now. Ever since the announcement of the engagement she had felt quite differently toward them, even those whom she knew were or had been interested in Ashley. She had disliked Felicité because at parties she had flirted with him and flattered him obviously. But now she found herself thinking: "She's really quite an attractive little thing and perhaps she *has* had a bad time at the hands of the Nazis." But suddenly, looking at the tall, beautiful girl standing beside the Frenchwoman, her charitable feeling toward all womenkind went. This girl had been dangerous, and instinctively she knew she still was dangerous. She said:

"I'm so glad you're pleased, Miss Redcliffe," although Sandra hadn't spoken. Afterward she bit her lip. She wished she hadn't said it. Anyhow, Sandra hadn't heard her. She was looking at Ashley, and he was looking at her.

"I was very interested in the announcement," she said to him.

"Yes?" His voice was polite, amused—he hoped it was amused.

"Yes. And I appreciated it. You see, I think I have developed that sense of humor we were speaking of."

She saw his face close up. "A sense of humor is always important," he said.

"I never realized how important—nor how necessary. You see, it allows me to congratulate both of you and to wish for your happiness."

She smiled at him and then at June. Her "rich-princess" smile, as Peter called it affectionately. Then she turned and walked through the guests out of the room. Felicité found herself having to run to keep up with her.

Chapter 18

IT WAS over a week later that Peter's guide pointed down the rough track that passed for a roadway and said: "Look, m'sieur, someone come in a car. A big American car."

Peter had been inside the tent, bottling some of the specimens he had caught the previous day. He came to the door of the tent to have a look. A car in these wild parts of Karpeti was an event. It was two weeks since he had left Princeville, and during that time he had seen very few white people. During these two weeks he had procured a rich harvest of specimens; now he was on the homeward track.

He had camped for the past two days just

outside a small native village, beside the remains of an imposing mansion built by one of the original French planters. Half of it was in ruins, but some of the rooms still remained intact, the decorations a revelation of exquisite craftsmanship in this primitive outpost of what had been the French Colonial Empire.

The twilight was fading rapidly as it does in Karpeti. Peter couldn't distinguish much about the car at first except the cloud of dust that accompanied it, but a little later he saw that it was green. A big green American car, and he remembered that Redcliffe had a car like that.

A few minutes later he was racing down the track to where the car had bumped itself to a standstill. He was calling in a high-pitched, incredulous voice: "Sandra. Sandra!"

Sandra was alone in the driver's seat, leaning over the wheel. Even in this light he could see that she looked exhausted.

He sprang up on the side of the car; he put his hand on her shoulder. His voice was ragged, uneven. "You *did* come, Sandra. But, my dearest, what a journey to undertake alone!"

"Not so bad, Peter. It's only taken me a day and a half."

"But you look tired out."

She smiled up at him faintly. "Perhaps I am a little tired. There was nowhere to sleep last night, so I slept in the car. I could do with a wash. Oh lord, what I'd give for a bath!"

He smiled back at her. "I haven't had a bath myself for two weeks. But we'll see what we can do in the way of a wash for you."

He wanted to ask her why she had come, but he couldn't bring himself to. There was an absurd hope in him that she had come because of him.

He helped her out of the car and said anxiously: "You'd better have a drink first, Sandra. You look as though you needed something to pull you together."

"Some coffee, perhaps."

He shook his head. "No, some rum. It's the best we can do out here in the way of brandy."

One of the boys had lighted the lamp in his tent. It gave quite a good light. He sat on the camp bed watching her as she sipped the rum and water and made an occasional face because she disliked the taste of it. She was changed. He had known it the first moment he saw her without fully realizing it. It wasn't only that she was tired, that the thick ropes of fair hair were loose and untidy, that there was dust on her face. Nor even that there were dark circles under her eyes or that her hand which held the glass shook badly. It was something in her which had changed. She was Sandra, and yet she was not the Sandra he knew.

"Feel better?" he asked when she finally put the glass down.

She nodded yes and added with a touch of the

old Sandra that made him smile: "Alcohol, like so many other things, is good in moderation. There are times when an artificial stimulant is necessary."

"Is that what you came all this way to tell me?"

But she didn't smile back at him. "I didn't come to tell you anything, Peter. At least I hope I didn't."

"That's swell, Sandra. Then perhaps you came to see me?"

He spoke lightly, but she heard that note of suppressed eagerness in his voice, and suddenly she understood. She wouldn't have understood a week ago, but she understood now. She cried sharply: "Oh, Peter, I shouldn't have come! I know now I shouldn't have come. It wasn't fair to you." She had risen to her feet. Her hands were clasping and unclasping. Tears were running down her dust-stained cheeks.

He got up off the low bed and came over to her. He put a hand on her shoulder and forced her gently down onto the campstool again.

"All right, you didn't come to see me, Sandra. But don't fuss yourself about it. I guess I can take it. Why did you come?"

"To get away," she said. "I *had* to get away. Oh, Peter"—she was crying openly—"it was beastly selfish of me to come to you. But I didn't understand."

"That's all right." His voice was jagged and

uneven again. "Forget all that. I'm just any fellow who might be fond of you in a friendly sort of way and who is useful and safe to unburden yourself to. Poor kid. Things went badly after I left, did they? But from whom did you have to get away?"

"From people, from parties. You can't go on saying you have a headache and can't come to parties! They don't believe you, anyhow. They know you haven't a headache. They know why you're not coming. But they don't say so. Even *Félicité* doesn't *say* so any longer. She just says '*pauvre chérie*' and sighs, and I—I could bash her head in!" Her voice rose sharply. She gave a small, wild laugh. "But perhaps that's unkind. I think she's trying to be decent. She was decent the—the night it happened. And now she's trying to be tactful. Everyone is so darned tactful. I never knew you could suffer so much because of people's tact!"

He said grimly: "Tact can be the cruelest weapon of all. Go on, Sandra."

"Well, there isn't anything more. I had that map you'd left with me. I thought I'd come and try and find you. It was an excuse. I took the car and left a note for Father. Oh, my poor Peter, I didn't really care whether I found you or not!"

He nodded, his voice still grim. "No, of course not. But you haven't told me why you had to

get away, Sandra. Was it something to do with Wood?"

"He's engaged to Miss Martin. It was announced the night of the British minister's party. Peter"—she raised her hands and clung to his coat—"I don't understand. Even now I don't understand. He—he kissed me that night—the very same night. He—he said he loved me." Her voice broke again. "It couldn't have been the money. I'd given that all away—at least the income from it—to Father."

"My poor little Sandra." He put his arms about her and held her while she went on crying. He surmised it was the first time she had really cried since it had happened.

"I couldn't bear it," she went on half incoherently. "The same moon out there in the garden as there had been that night. Every night the same moon. He *said* he loved me—oh, he did say it, Peter!—and then not twenty minutes afterward the announcement."

He said roughly: "It must have been hell," and added anxiously: "You—you didn't give yourself away, Sandra?"

She had ceased crying. She smiled bitterly. "Oh, I did. I gave myself away horribly." She added apologetically: "You see, I've never had much experience at—at—"

"At losing the person you love?"

"No, I haven't." Her voice was quite humble. "You see, I've never loved anyone."

"I know."

"Oh, Peter, *please*. I'm so sorry," she whispered.

The lamp flickered and seemed about to go out. "Those dashed boys," he said and raised his voice, shouting for them to come and put more kerosene in the lamp. It was a diversion, and afterward she seemed to have got control of herself.

She told him something about the trip, the terrible road, the numerous punctures she'd had. Luckily she'd always found a native who knew enough to patch a tire for her. Yes, she had been scared, she admitted, sleeping by herself—or trying to sleep—in the big car by the roadside. "The shrubs here are such strange shapes, aren't they?" she said. "And at night they throw rather frightening shadows. And then when you pass the mangrove swamps you seem to see eyes and faces coming out of the mud. The eyes and faces, perhaps, of those poor French settlers who were murdered here so long ago."

He said sharply: "Don't think about that, Sandra. There isn't a country in the world where people haven't been murdered."

"No—but here it seems possible. Other places, our own country, for instance, murder always seems fantastic. The very thought of it seems fantastic. But here one can picture, one can actually feel it happening."

He looked at her anxiously. "Sandra, you're

getting morbid. This isn't like you. Karpeti today is almost as civilized as our own country. Murder wouldn't happen here now." But he didn't say it with any conviction.

"It did, Peter, you know. Someone tried to murder Ashley."

Her voice broke on his name, and a shudder went through her. The shooting had been hushed up, but she knew, as everyone knew in Karpeti, that someone had tried to murder Ashley Wood. Some said it must have been an irate husband, others a woman he'd given up, and others stuck to the theory of a native he had somehow insulted. Would the attempt be repeated? Well, that was June's worry now, she tried to tell herself, and knew it would always be her worry, no matter where it happened or when it happened.

The boy brought them in supper, a primitive meal consisting almost entirely of food out of tins with the addition of ripe bananas and lush slices of papaw. As they ate Peter said: "The boy was telling me that there's a *bombash* near here tonight. That's a native dance. We'll go and have a look at it. I saw one in another village about a week ago. They're interesting in a way. Awfully primitive."

Sandra said sharply: "I don't think I like primitive things."

"You're still afraid of them, aren't you?" he

said quietly. "I think it as well you should get over your fear."

They went to the *bombash*, walking through the bushes and shrubs, down a twisting mule track on the hillside. The tall palm trees were silvered signposts; the moon was full and white. A lovely walk, a heavenly night. Sandra knew it would have been heavenly had she been walking with Ashley; knew it so surely and despairingly that she cried out in pain.

"Peter, what does one do to cure oneself of love?"

He turned his head and looked at her, his brown eyes dark with concern. He took her hand and tucked her arm through his gently.

"Some people take to drink."

"You—you think that helps?"

"I wouldn't know. I've never been that fond of drink. Others grin and are almost aggressively cheerful. I don't know whether that helps them, but it certainly hurts their friends." He smiled faintly, unhumorously. "Others just go on living and making the best of it."

She said quickly: "That's the harder way, isn't it?"

"The harder and possibly the least successful. It's a comfort to be able to dramatize oneself."

She asked humbly: "Do you think I'm dramatizing myself, Peter?"

"Not consciously. You're just being primitive."

"Because I ran away?"

"Yes, and because you ran away to me. Instinctively you knew I'd help you because I can't help myself."

She whispered: "What are you going to do for me, Peter?"

He said after a pause, leaving a space after each of his words: "I don't quite know yet."

They had reached the raised wooden platform with the thatched roof of banana leaves where the *bombash* was being held. The natives had started dancing at dusk, and the dance was well under way. Three musicians sat cross-legged at one corner, beating on the drums. It was unlike any dance music Sandra had ever heard; it seemed to have no tune but its insistent pulsating rhythm. There were a few lamps suspended from the ceiling, and these cast flickering oblong shadows on the seminaked black bodies of the dancers. They danced sometimes in couples, sometimes alone; danced not only with their feet but with their whole bodies and their minds, dancing as only half savages can dance, losing all consciousness of their surroundings in the throbbing, insistent beat of the drums. Occasionally one of the dancers, worked up into a frenzy of excitement, would execute a solo dance, and the others would stand around in a ring watching him, clapping the rhythm out with their hands, stamping it out with their feet. He would dance on and on, his steps becoming

each moment more intricate and wilder until he would collapse in an exhausted, semiconscious heap on the floor. Someone would kick him aside, and they would go on dancing.

Sandra watched for some time, scarcely breathing. All her little ideas she had come out here with, ideas about model villages, education, modern sanitation, seemed very far away.

She said in an awed voice: "It doesn't seem possible, Peter. These people aren't conscious of themselves or of us."

"No. And it's good to lose consciousness of oneself for a time, Sandra."

"I don't think I could—not like that."

"Differently, but you could. We all can and do when our emotions are sufficiently stirred.

Most of us have experienced something of that sort in our youth. Certainly in our adolescence. Didn't you?"

"No, I don't think I did."

He took her cold hand and pressed it. "Be careful then, Sandra, if it should come now."

Peter said presently, peering into the shadows at the other side of the dance floor: "There's a man over there, and he certainly isn't a native. He doesn't look English or American either. Wonder what he's doing here?"

"Possibly he's a tourist come to see the *bombash* as we have."

"Possibly," he agreed. But after, as they made their way back to the camp, Peter questioned

his boys about the white man. The boy, too, had been inquisitive about the stranger and had made inquiries. He was a foreign gentleman, a German, and he had come to this remote part of the island to engage natives as bearers. He was paying good money. That had been all the boy had been able to glean.

"Odd," Peter said, scratching his head. "What the heck does a German want to come out here hiring porters for? Surely he could get as many as he wants about the docks in Princeville."

Since Sandra had no answer the subject lapsed, although at a later date it was to spring startlingly back into her memory.

Peter had had a bed made up for her in one of the less dilapidated rooms of the old French mansion. He had given her his own bed and his own primitive washing arrangements. He lay on a blanket in the dusty, mildewing hall outside to watch over her. The next day they broke camp and started homeward.

Chapter 19

JUNE knew that Sandra had left Princeville. Everyone knew almost five minutes after she had gone, as was the way in Karpeti. And since the excitement of June's and Ashley's engage-

ment had simmered down and there was little to talk about, they talked about that. They said: "Gone off to have a grand reconciliation with the fiancé. Silly little fool to lose her head over Ashley." They were all the bitterer about it, for most of the women in varying degrees had done the same thing themselves.

June felt savage whenever she thought of Sandra, and that was illogical because, after all, she had won out. Sandra, presumably, had lost. But it was Ashley's attitude that made June feel savage. Not that he ever mentioned Sandra. It was his studied avoidance of any reference to her that made June feel savage. She began to try to make him mention her, even to trap him into it. It was like a game, only it was too tragic for a game. All games cease to be funny when deep human emotions are involved.

Ashley was drinking more than he usually drank. The majority of people wouldn't have noticed it. But June wasn't the majority, and she noticed it. He always had carried his liquor well and he did now, but occasionally she noticed a slight thickening of his speech, and once or twice when he was dictating he slurred several words together.

He might have been a little drunk—she *hoped* he was a little drunk—the afternoon she told him she had heard that Sandra had left town.

"Oh yes," he said.

She should have let it go at that, but she couldn't.

"I heard it from Madame Dupont, our manageress, you know, who had heard it from Pierre, whose brother is butler at the Redcliffes'. She just walked out, it seems, in her father's best car with a note left for him on the mantelshelf. They *say* she's gone to join the fiancé who is lassoing lizards in the wilds. Quite romantic and a *very* satisfactory conclusion to everything, don't you think?"

"I don't know what you mean by 'everything.' If you think it a *happy* ending for a girl as full of life and vitality as Sandra to throw herself into the arms of a very prosaic young man whose passion in life is skinning worms and snakes and putting them into test tubes, you've a very odd idea of a happy ending, my love."

"But, Ashley, she *was* engaged to him when she arrived here. And you're all wrong about Peter. He isn't a prosaic young man. He's very intelligent and charming and quite *fun*. When he starts talking about his work it really sounds fascinating. . . ."

"Quite," Ashley broke in in a clipped, humorless voice. "A Slade of New York with the Slade background, not to mention the Slade fortune, could make grave digging sound romantic if one were that sort of a girl."

"Ashley!" She almost gasped. "You're not

thinking *I'm* impressed by Peter's background and money!"

"It would seem that you might be. I remember you did spend the night together in his car."

"Darling"—she was laughing, quite happily laughing—"please let me think that you're jealous! I've credited you with many human emotions, but certainly never with jealousy before."

He turned round on her savagely, and it was then she noticed his slightly slurred speech. "Of course I'm not jealous! Why should I be jealous of a half-baked young scientist who doesn't know the first thing about life or living? Why should I be jealous even if a stupid sense of pride has forced her into his arms, even though he should reap the rewards of what I've done to her? Of making her come alive. You've heard the story of Pygmalion and Galatea, haven't you? An absurd, fantastic story—but I've made it true. I wish her joy of him; I wish him joy of her. What do you mean by insinuating that I might be jealous?"

There was a pause. June didn't know that her face was as white as it was or that her lips were bloodless.

"I was fool enough to think you might have been jealous of Peter because of me," she said in a very still voice.

Ashley stared at her. He seemed to pull himself together. He passed a hand over his forehead and muttered: "Oh lord, have I been talking

rot? I'll confess to you, my sweet—and you may as well know the worst about your future husband—that I was out to lunch with Sir Hugo and the Greek minister, and we had one or two over the odd in the way of liqueur brandies afterward. Monsieur Mopopolis brought up a bottle of the old stuff from his cellar. Napoleon brandy, so called. You probably noticed me reeling in here about four o'clock."

But she hadn't noticed him reeling in. She had seen him walk in, apparently quite normally. But it was comforting to put everything he had said down to the brandy. Alcohol, too much work, the effect of his recent wound—all excuses she was able to summon to her assistance. She rang the changes on them, and lately it hadn't mattered very much whether they made sense or not. So long as it was an excuse to explain to herself his sharp moods of irritability followed by his almost more shattering moods of penitence. Penitence didn't become Ashley. To explain away, too, the many times he didn't seem to hear her when she spoke to him or the way he evaded any sentimental scene with a flippant remark—and the way he kissed her. "Well, old sweet, sleep well," he'd say as he left her. He'd hesitate, then he'd bend quickly and kiss her cheek. Sometimes when she turned her lips up to his he'd kiss them, and once she was foolish enough to cling about his neck and cry: "Ashley darling, what's wrong with you, what's

wrong with me, that you should kiss me like that?" He didn't answer at once, then he smiled, that half grin when his face slipped sideways. "Maybe I've kissed too many women the other way, old sweet," he said.

She was content with that. She had to be. Even in her poor folly she tried to believe she was glad. Didn't that mean that Ashley really loved her? That she was set apart from other women in his life? He kissed her not with passion and desire, but with respect. And all the time a quiet voice whispered in her heart: "You fool. You poor fool, June Martin, stop kidding yourself."

There were parties given for them—any excuse for a party was a good excuse in Karpeti. There were the same people at all the parties, and they all said the same things. All the women said how lucky Ashley was, and they all meant how lucky she was. She knew this—and she wore her engagement as some women wear a red feather in their hats. She wore it with defiance because of the very cold feeling in her heart.

It was early evening when Sandra and Peter arrived back at Plantation House. Sandra had been almost gay during the last few miles of that journey. She kept telling herself that things would be all right when she got back. She was cured, or as nearly as didn't matter. She would be able to face Ashley and June and . . . and

. . . But she didn't go farther than that.

Félicité, hearing the car drive up, came out onto the porch to meet them. She was wearing a party gown of black moiré silk, with a full skirt and a high neck. It had the chic of Paris, but it was obviously several seasons old.

"Ah, zere are the two wanderers 'ome," she cried gaily. "Your papa, 'e is dressing, *ma chérie*. We were very surprise when you leave, Sandra, but we think maybe eet is for ze best, and eet 'as been for the best, eh?" And her dark eyes twinkled roguishly from one to the other of them.

Sandra's thin, tired body stiffened. "It was a most interesting trip. I—I thought since I was out here I should see something of the interior. As Peter was there, it seemed too good an opportunity to miss, so I went and joined him."

"Ah, so it was but to see the countrie in the middle that you went to join your Peter?" Félicité laughed, apparently undaunted by the sudden coldness of Sandra's attitude. "When I was a young girl if I want to see a young man I jus' say I want to see 'im and not the middle of a countrie!" And she gave her high-pitched flutelike laugh.

Sandra could have shaken her, but Peter said easily: "You're wrong, Félicité. Sandra and I are all washed up and likely to remain so. But we had a swell time together, and we're great friends—if that interests you."

The little Frenchwoman looked at him and sighed. "Is zat so? My poor Clifford, 'e was 'oping for so much. And I too. I love ze romance."

"Romance be damned," Peter said cheerfully. "What about a drink? I could surè use one."

"Of course. We will 'ave the drinks brought out here." She clapped her hands. "Pierre," she said when the butler had appeared, "bring the drinks out and tell ze master that 'is daughter 'ave arrive."

If Sandra hadn't been quite so tired she might have noticed that Felicité's manner seemed to have acquired an added confidence and that she spoke to the colored butler with a new air of authority. But she was very tired, and now that she had reached home she had a sense of letdown that was quite frightening.

"You will 'ave the tomato juice, *chérie*?" Felicité, who was supervising over the drink trolley, suggested.

"No. I think I'll have a rum and water—like you gave me the night I arrived at your camp, Peter."

"The rum and *water*," Felicité shrieked. "But zat is so dull a drink! I shall ask Pierre to make us ze rum cocktail, you and I. He make ze rum cocktail very good."

Pierre was renowned through Princeville for the excellence of his rum cocktails. He managed to get just the right combination of rum, lime,

grenadine, and ice. They were extremely palatable, but no one except the uninitiated had ever imagined they were not also extremely potent. Sandra, who usually had tomato juice or an occasional sherry, did not know this.

She felt refreshed after the first one and was contemplating a second when Felicité said: "We go to a party tonight, your papa and I. The British circle, they give a party for Ashley and June at Le Cabaret. There will be dancing and the champagne supper. The invitation say Mees Redcliffe and Mr. Slade. But perhaps you are too tired after the trip, *chérie?*"

At the mention of Ashley's name Sandra, who had been reclining in a deck chair, jerked herself to a sitting position. The sense of letdown that had been like a dead feeling went. She tried to say: "You're right, Felicité; I'm far too tired." But she found she couldn't say it and she knew, too, which was worse, she didn't want to say it.

"No, I'm not tired," she said. "At least I won't be when I have had another cocktail."

Peter didn't say anything, but he sprang to his feet and poured her out one. She drank it almost at a gulp and said: "I think it might be amusing to go to a party. Music, lights, dancing, quite a contrast to what we've been having the past few days—or"—she turned toward Peter—"you for weeks, poor dear."

"I'm quite willing," he said, "*if*"—he looked

down at her intently—"you think it a good idea, Sandra."

She seemed to resent his remark and take it as a challenge. "Of course I think it a good idea. I'm—I'm longing to go to a party!"

She didn't feel tired any longer. She felt fresh and elated. She thought: "I'll go to the party. I'll meet Ashley. I'll laugh at him and at myself. I'll show him. I'll show myself; I'll show everyone that I don't care. If only Peter would stop looking at me like that. I think I'll have another cocktail."

Le Cabaret had been specially decorated for the party. Huge bunches of hibiscus, bougainvillaea, and geraniums were in vases against the walls and on the small tables that were spaced about the dance floor and which spilled over the terrace into the garden. Each table was lighted by a small stand lamp, and as one wound one's way up the hill toward the restaurant one thought it must be fairyland. The breeze blowing down off the mountains brought the sound of music played by native instruments. It wasn't the real native music Peter and Sandra had heard at the *bombash*; this was a sophisticated, romantic version of it.

Sandra's luggage had arrived in the interval. The dress she wore tonight was white satin, superbly cut. A model gown. Her aunt had insisted upon it, and at the time Sandra had thought it an unnecessary extravagance, for de-

spite her enormous fortune she had never spent money freely upon herself. But now she was glad that her aunt had persuaded her. It made her look tall and slim and very lovely. The white seemed to accentuate her fairness. She looked like a Nordic goddess. As he saw her come out of the cloakroom into the brightly lighted foyer Peter was struck afresh by the color in her cheeks, the sparkle in her eyes. "Perhaps," he thought, "she is getting over Ashley."

June sensed Sandra was in the room before she saw her. She saw people turn their heads, heard the murmur of interest that went through the room. She saw Ashley, who had been standing with a little group a short distance from her, suddenly stiffen. She saw him start forward and then stop and presently resume the conversation, but as though he no longer had his mind upon it.

She turned then and saw Sandra, and her first reaction was to wish that she, June, had not worn white too. She had been so pleased with her new dress, bought from Madame Christie's, who had all her gowns sent by air from New York.

But beside Sandra's white model gown with its simplicity and its exquisite lines, hers looked like just any white dress and not worth more than the few pounds she had paid for it. She could have cried.

Peter stood at her elbow and asked if she

would care to dance. She turned toward him with a wild rush of relief. It wasn't only that she liked him very much and was glad to see him again, but he understood. She wasn't sure what he understood or what she wanted him to understand. But she said quickly: "Yes, I'd love to dance." He put his arms about her and they started dancing.

The American band was playing a rumba. He was an easy dancer; a girl didn't have to worry to follow him.

"Did you have a good time on your trip?" she asked.

"Very good. I collected some interesting specimens. I think even my old prof will be pleased."

"You must have been glad when your fiancée arrived."

He smiled faintly. "Wishful thinking, Miss Martin."

A hot color whipped her cheeks. "I don't know what you mean."

"Don't you? But I think it might have been a small relief to you if Sandra and I had come back engaged."

"Why should it be a relief to *me*?" Her voice was shaking with anger—with a sense of fear also.

"I'm sorry. Perhaps I've said too much. And I haven't congratulated you upon your engagement yet, have I?"

"Thank you." Her voice was small and brittle. She was hating him badly. He knew it. He felt sorry because he liked her. He liked her in a most companionable way and he felt that in different circumstances they would have been great friends.

"You're going to be married soon, I suppose?"

"I don't know. Could we talk of something else besides me for a change?"

"We could talk about your fiancé, Mr. Ashley Wood."

"You're being rather insufferable, aren't you?" Her voice was a little hoarse, even a little desperate.

"Am I? Say, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be. Then let's talk about *me*. To talk about oneself is always an interesting subject for the one who's doing the talking." He smiled.

She smiled, too, perfunctorily. "Yes, let's talk about you. How long are you and Miss Redcliffe going to remain here in Karpeti, Mr. Slade?"

"I thought we were discussing *me*. Entirely, exclusively, exhaustively *me*. And really, Miss Redcliffe's plans don't concern me any longer. She may decide to make her father a long visit. She may even decide to stay out here. But I—I'm hitting the homeward trail in a very few days."

"You're going soon?" She couldn't account for the sharp sense of dismay she felt. He was really rather a hateful young man, considering

the things he had said to her, or at least insinuated. But she had a feeling that when he went she would be alone. It was an absurd feeling in the light of her engagement to Ashley, and she didn't understand it.

"Yes, quite soon. I telephoned about my plane just before I came here tonight. They say I can take it up for a trial spin in two days."

"Oh, how lovely! Do you know, I've never been in an airplane."

"Haven't you? Then you've certainly missed something."

"I've always wanted to go, but somehow the opportunity has never come my way."

"It's coming your way right now, lady," he said, smiling. "What do you say to coming up with me when I go on Saturday? We could take a flight around the bay, over to the other side of the island if you like."

"Oh yes, I would like! Saturday afternoon—that's fine. I don't work on Saturday afternoons." Her gray eyes were shining; enthusiasm had made her voice soft and lilting. "What a really *nice* girl she is," he thought, "so unspoiled." Were the circumstances different, what fun it would be taking her places and showing her things. But suddenly the enthusiasm went out of her voice. "I don't suppose Ashley—" she began and stopped.

He said in a light bantering voice: "Don't tell me he'll be jealous!"

"No, I wasn't thinking that." But the hostility was back in her tone again. Yet after a while he talked her into a better mood, and by the time he left her at the end of three consecutive dances the date for Saturday was definite.

He crossed the dance floor toward the bar, looking about for Sandra, but she wasn't in the dance room. She must be sitting with her father and Felicité at one of the tables on the veranda, he decided. He'd swallow a quick drink and go out and join them.

But Sandra was in the bar. She was perched on a high stool before the modernistic glass counter, a champagne cocktail in front of her. She was flushed; her eyes were sparkling, and she was laughing rather inordinately. Several young men were grouped about her, drinking with her and laughing too. As Peter stood there watching, the barman passed her another champagne cocktail. He thought: "She's had enough. Quite enough. Those rum cocktails before dinner were pretty potent, and champagne ones on top. Gee whiz! A hardened drinker couldn't stand it, and Sandra has scarcely drunk at all." He moved over to join the group. He said quietly: "Hello, Sandra."

She waved her glass in his direction and called gaily:

"Hello, Peter. Having a good time?"

Her words were ever so faintly slurred. It gave him a sense of shock. Her voice, her atti-

tude, her laughter were so unlike the Sandra he knew.

"Yes. And you?"

She waved the glass again. "Oh, swell. Do you know, Peter, I'm taking your advice. I'm doing it the easiest way. And it's a pleasant way too. You take a tip from me."

He didn't pretend to misunderstand her, but there was nothing he could do or say but suggest she come with him out onto the veranda and join her father and Mademoiselle Perrier.

"Why should we go out and join *them*?" she asked. "They don't want us." She gave him a prodigious wink. "We'd be spoilsports."

That shocked him too. Hearing that from Sandra.

"All the same, Sandra, I think we might go out onto the veranda."

"But I don't want to. I want to stay here and have another champagne cocktail. And then I want to dance."

"But you don't dance!"

"Oh, but I shall. One should try everything once, shouldn't one? I'm going to dance and dance."

"Then perhaps you'll dance with me now?"

"No, Peter." She shook her head vigorously so that one of the fair thick braids of hair fell loose. "I'm not going to dance with you. I'm going to dance with"—he saw her hesitate; she

raised her head before she brought out the name—"Ashley."

It wasn't until then that Peter realized that Ashley was also in the small barroom. He was standing at the far end of the glass counter, a rum and soda in his hand. He was in a group of men, but he seemed isolated. It was his attitude which isolated him. He was obviously not paying any attention to what they said, not even bothering to answer them. He was staring moodily over the rim of his glass into a far corner.

Peter almost prayed that he hadn't heard Sandra's invitation. Or if he had he would pay no attention to it. But he looked up sharply as though coming out of a trance and said: "Did someone mention my name?"

"I did." Sandra raised her voice. "I said I was going to dance with you, Ashley."

He looked at her then. He looked at her for a long moment, and then without speaking he put his glass down on the counter and went toward her. "I'm delighted to hear that you're going to dance with me, Miss Redcliffe."

Peter turned away and went through the doors onto the veranda. He didn't want to see them dancing together. He felt he never wanted to see either of them again.

Sandra had no natural aptitude for dancing. Her feet were not large, but they seemed enormous on the floor, and she had little idea what

to do with them. It was due to the fact that Ashley was a skilled dancer that the episode was not more amusing than it was to the observers. There were titters. Sandra stumbled more than once, and each time she gave a wild shout that sounded unfortunately like: "Whoopee!" Ashley's face grew grim. His lips tightened. He said at last through his teeth: "Has this farce gone on long enough for your entertainment, Miss Redcliffe?"

"Farce?" she said. "Where's the farce, Ashley? A girl should learn to dance; don't you agree?"

"A girl should learn a number of things. And the first is not to drink more than she can take without making an exhibition of herself."

"The same applies to a man. Didn't a dickey-bird tell me *you'd* been drinking a great deal lately?"

"I always drink a good deal. Any blasted bird—or old hen—will tell you that."

"But lately, Ashley," she insisted, "it *can't* have anything to do with what Peter said—about drink being a recognized cure for love? Or can it?"

"Why should I want a cure for love? If you remember the lady of my choice has graciously consented to marry me."

"Forgive me if I shriek with laughter. Oh, blast——" She tripped and would have fallen but for Ashley's supporting arm. Without more ado

he half pushed, half dragged her toward the nearest exit. The door opened directly out onto the garden. She stood drawing the fresh air into her lungs, leaning against the support of the door.

"That old moon," she said. "Still up there. It's been up there laughing and laughing and jeering at me every night since it happened." There was a pause, then she said in a voice that was scarcely even a whisper: "Did it happen, Ashley?"

He said roughly: "Did what happen?"

"A man and a girl in a garden," she said. "And the man kissed the girl. He said he loved the girl. A simple story—or was it so simple after all!"

"A man can kiss a girl without its meaning anything."

"Oh yes. But this kiss meant something. To her—I think it did to him."

"The man, if you remember, said he could never marry the girl."

"But the girl, if you remember, intimated that she had every intention of marrying him."

There was a pause. He said quietly: "And the story ended with his marrying the other girl."

"The story isn't ended yet," she said and laughed in that wild, unrestrained way she had been laughing ever since Peter had found her in the barroom. Ashley put his hands on her shoulders and shook her and said: "Stop laughing, Sandra. For heaven's sake, stop laughing!"

But she went on laughing, and then he saw the tears on her cheeks. He took her in his arms and said: "Darling. Oh, darling, darling," in a voice like a groan. She whispered: "Oh, Ashley, I can't bear it. I *can't* bear it." Her voice was a bewildered little girl's voice, not the rich-princess voice at all. She clung to his arms with all the tenacity and despair of someone who is drowning. "My love, my sweetheart," he said, and his voice was muffled by her hair.

Peter, returning from the short walk he had taken to clear his head and to try to think things out, saw them. He heard the end of Sandra's remark and caught Ashley's mumbled reply. He stood still a moment, and the pain in his heart was not so much for himself as for them. It was odd, but his own suffering felt lighter at that moment. He felt like a spectator, deeply concerned, but still a spectator.

There was a shout inside the dance room. "Ashley, Ashley. Where is Ashley?" The cry was taken up by many male voices. "Where is Ashley? We want to drink his health." He moved away from Sandra so abruptly she swayed and fell against the support. That moment Peter moved out of the shadows toward them.

"You'd better go inside," he said to Ashley. "I'll take care of Sandra."

Ashley hesitated. Then he said, "Thank you," curtly, and stepped through the doorway.

Peter said, speaking roughly because of his intense pity for her: "Pull yourself together, Sandra. You don't want to make yourself conspicuous, do you?"

She had had her eyes closed; now she jerked her lids open and stared at him. "I don't think I care."

"You should care. For your father's sake. For my sake." He felt he was talking like a maiden aunt, but he didn't know what else to say.

"We're not engaged any longer, Peter."

"I know. But I—I still care what becomes of you."

She moved her head and sighed. "I wish you didn't."

"So do I!" He said it with real feeling, for in place of his former tender mood had come a sense of irritation with her.

She sighed again. "Poor Peter."

There was a pause. "Will you let me take you home, Sandra?"

She straightened. Her lassitude went. She seemed suddenly full of vitality. "No, of course I don't want to go home! Why should I go home? You're treating me as though I were a naughty child, Peter! The party has hardly begun. I haven't even had supper yet. No one has had supper. It's beginning now, isn't it? Let's go inside."

He felt it best to take her inside and drop the argument about going home. He knew she

wouldn't have gone. It wasn't only the drinks she had had tonight; it was some force within her that would make her stay on to the bitter end.

The dance music had ceased. The band had left their instruments on the small platform and gone off to their own supper. Peter was steering Sandra toward the table where old Redcliffe and Felicité were sitting when he saw that it was next to the table where Ashley and June were seated with Sir Hugo and several others. But it was too late then to change the direction. Felicité had seen them and called: "Ah, 'ere you are. Come along; we make room for you 'ere."

They sat down at the table and immediately one of the waiters started serving supper. He poured the champagne and left the bottle standing lopsided in its silver ice bucket.

Sandra drank her champagne greedily. When she had finished she reached across and helped herself to another glass. Peter couldn't contain himself. He said sharply: "Don't you think you've had *enough*, Sandra?"

She pouted across at him. "You are an old spoilsport, Peter. Can't a girl have a drink? I'm not drunk, am I, Father?" She appealed to Redcliffe.

"If you are I'm afraid it proves conclusively you're *my* child," he said and was a little alarmed that she should appear to enjoy the joke so inordinately. He was even more alarmed as sup-

per progressed and Sandra became so noticeably gay. It was all very well to enjoy oneself at a party, but people were turning to stare at her from other tables. Especially was this true of Sir Hugo's table which was, unfortunately, very close indeed. He had always deplored Sandra's lack of interest in worldly enjoyments—the sort of enjoyments that amused him—but now he began to wish fervently she had not changed quite so radically. He mopped his brow twice and wondered how he could introduce the subject of a hasty departure when Sir Hugo, once again the master of ceremonies, rose and proposed the toast to the guests of honor, Ashley and June. The toast was drunk, and Ashley, pressed, rose to reply.

"I stand before you a very happy man," he began.

And then Sandra laughed. She threw back her head and laughed out loud, bitter, derisive laughter that startled and shocked all those who heard it. Everyone stared at her, and for a moment no one seemed to know what to do.

Oddly it was June who moved first. She sprang up from the table and swung round toward Sandra. Her face had been very white a moment before, but now it was flaming. Her gray eyes looked as though they were on fire. All evening she had had herself in perfect, even rigid, control. Perhaps for days, even for weeks, she had had herself in that same rigid control.

But now it was broken. That laughter of Sandra's coming on top of Ashley's words had done that to her.

She said through her teeth but in a voice clearly audible to those at the tables near by:

"Shut up, you drunken little fool. What are you trying to do: make yourself even more of a laughingstock than you are already? Don't you know you're the joke of Karpeti?"

Sandra struck her. She, too, had sprung to her feet, and now she hit June as hard as she could across the face. June staggered back and almost simultaneously Peter, Redcliffe, and Ashley intervened.

Peter and Redcliffe took the now hysterically sobbing Sandra outside. Ashley put his arm about June. He did his best to save what he could of the situation.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said lightly, "you've just been sitting in on an episode from our latest film: *Fun and Games in the Tropics*, or *What the South Seas Does to Even the Nicest Girls*. Ladies and gentlemen, I had been just about to say before I was interrupted that I stand before you tonight a very happy man because my dear June has agreed to marry me at once. We are to be married next Sunday afternoon. The reception will be at the Paris Club, and you are all invited."

Chapter 20

PETER was awakened by a soft tap on his door the next morning and a very small voice saying: "May I come in, Peter?"

He jumped out of bed, flung on a dressing gown, and went across the polished wood floor in his bare feet to open the door.

Sandra stood there, also in a dressing gown, and her heavy plaits of hair hung loose to her waist. She looked much younger than her nineteen years. A child—and at that moment a very tragic child.

"Come in," he said, and because he still felt really angry with her, he added: "You can't cause any more of a scandal than you have already."

"That's—that's what I wanted to ask you. What did happen last night?"

"You don't remember?"

Her pale face went a brilliant crimson. "Well, vaguely. *Some* things, Peter. Some pretty terrible things, I'm afraid." Her voice sunk to a frightened whisper.

He nodded. His anger was gone and instead he felt very sorry for her. All the same he determined not to mince matters. "Yes, things

weren't too rosy last night, Sandra. To put it bluntly, you were drunk."

"I know." Her voice was humble and penitent and completely unlike her usual voice. "But what did I *do*, Peter?"

All she had done rose to his mind in a fresh wave of horror. He might have said: "You let Ashley Wood take you in his arms when he's engaged to June." It was odd, but of all the incredible things that had happened last night that seemed to him of paramount importance. He felt angry again when he thought of it. Poor little June fighting such a game, losing battle. Fighting it against odds that were so tremendous they were frightening. And if nothing happened within the next few days she was facing a lifetime of going on with the fight and all the time losing, losing.

But he didn't say any of this. He said instead: "You laughed right in the middle of Wood's speech, and when June told you off you slapped her across the face. It was certainly not an edifying spectacle."

She was sitting on the edge of his bed, gazing down at her feet in the soft woolly bedroom slippers. "I *do* remember now. She said I was the laughingstock of Karpeti."

"Well, she wasn't far wrong at that."

"I don't suppose she is wrong—*now*. But before, Peter? I—I wasn't a laughingstock before, was I?"

He didn't answer immediately. He was pacing the floor, his hands in the loose pockets of his gown. "Well, there was talk, Sandra. Most people knew you were," he paused, "infatuated with Wood. There was that incident with the spotlight at your father's party, and then when their engagement was announced you—well, you walked out of the room, didn't you? I suppose the gossip caused by those incidents would have died down, but now—" He paused and shrugged and went on pacing the floor.

"No, I guess there's not much hope of my living *this* down. I'll—I'll have to go away, won't I, Peter?"

He swung round toward her. "It's all very well, Sandra; you *can* go away. You can go back to New York to your half-crazy old aunt with her incredible old-fashioned and romantic ideas about life—all taken from mid-Victorian literature. You can go back to your books and lectures and higher economics—but what of June? You've made a merry little hell of *her* life, and *she's* got to stay out here and face it out. *She* can't get away. It might be her salvation if she could, but how can she? Even if she gave up Ashley she'd probably have to remain here at her job."

"You think she might give up Ashley?"

"No, I don't. Not willingly. So don't indulge in any wishful thinking on that score. She's in love with him—or thinks she is—and the fact that

she's had to fight you like a she-cat has only stiffened her determination to marry him. If you were hoping to get him you've certainly conducted your campaign in a most unsubtle way."

She said in a small voice: "I didn't have any campaign, Peter."

"No"—his voice softened—"I guess you didn't. That's part of the trouble. You're just learning things that the average American high-school girl knows at sixteen. You may have passed all your examinations with first-class grades, but you don't know one thing about the get-your-man technique. Worse than that, you came out here full of suppressed emotions that most girls have worked out of their systems by half-baked love affairs at college. The moment you got drunk all those repressions came out with a bang. Gee whiz," he ended ruefully, "they did come out with a bang!"

There was a pause. He had ceased pacing the floor. He picked a cigarette off the table and stood with his back half turned toward her, smoking it.

"What do you think I should do, Peter? Apologize to Miss Martin?"

He made a gesture of irritated impatience. "Why in the name of all the saints ask *me*?"

"I'm sorry, Peter. But you always have helped me."

"Don't you think *I've* got any emotions?" he went on savagely, as though she hadn't spoken.

"Why treat me as though I were a cross between an aged uncle and a father-confessor? Damn it all, Sandra, I'm a young man and I've as much feeling—as much sex, if you like—as the next fellow."

"I'm sorry, Peter." Her voice was stiff and hurt. She got up off the bed and had started toward the door when he laid a hand on her arm and stopped her.

"No, *I'm* sorry, Sandra." He was smiling faintly now. "I shouldn't have said that. Certainly I don't want to add to your troubles. And I'm glad you think you can come and talk things over with me, only"—he paused and ran a hand back over his dark hair—"I'm not awfully sure where I stand emotionally myself at the moment, and therefore I'm not certain what advice I can or should give you. Things have changed with me. I'd suspected they had, but last night I was sure of it."

"I don't understand, Peter." She looked up at him with wide blue eyes. "Do you—do you mean you're not in love with me any more?"

His smile became a little twisted. "I think that about sums it up." He took both her cold hands. "Shall we say I don't love you in just the same way as I used to?"

Her eyes were full of tears suddenly. "I'm glad, Peter."

He squeezed her hands tightly. "Bless you, I believe you are."

When she was almost through the door she turned back toward him. "And you think I should apologize to Miss Martin, Peter?"

He said gravely: "You must do whatever you think about that, Sandra."

"Yes"—her voice was very low, almost frightened—"I suppose I must."

It said something for Sandra's will power and a great deal for her courage that she appeared at the breakfast table. Felicité was also down to breakfast, and Sandra was a little surprised to see that instead of the exotic house coat she had formerly appeared in she was wearing a neat black morning frock with white collar and cuffs. It was the same sort of morning dress that thousands of French housewives wear every morning of their lives. Had Sandra been less occupied with her own affairs this change in Felicité's appearance might have caused her the same alarm as the air of authority she had assumed with the servants last night.

"Ah, there you are, *chérie*," Felicité said as Sandra made a somewhat belated appearance. "You 'ave the thick 'ead, eh?"

Sandra colored vividly. "Well, yes. I have a slight headache," she admitted.

"You eat the papaw. That is the best for the thick 'ead," Felicité advised. "Some papaw and then some black coffee." She turned toward Redcliffe. "Cut your daughter a nice slice of papaw, my Clifford."

It should also have surprised Sandra that her father was at the breakfast table. Not only was he there, but he had made a stab at dressing. He had on some creased white duck trousers, a white shirt, and a foulard silk dressing jacket. Obediently he rose, went toward the sideboard, and cut Sandra a fairly large slice of papaw which he brought back to the table and placed before her.

"You eat that and then you feel better," Felicité said. She added: "You were a bad girl last night, Sandra. You cause mooch embarrassment to your *pauvre* papa and to me, but since we are of one familie, we say no more about it. We forget it, do we not, my Clifford?"

"Hang it all, Felicité," Redcliffe protested, "don't speak to the child as though she were a criminal! She only had a spot too much and forgot who she was. Why, in my young days—"

"That is what I mean, my Clifford," Felicité interposed quietly. "In your young days you do mooch the same, and your mama, she cut you out of your inheritance. Now you do not ever do the same again because I am 'ere to see that you do not."

Redcliffe opened his mouth as though he would protest, but he didn't. He merely shrugged, looked down at his plate, and went on drinking his coffee.

Sandra, who was in the mood for apologizing to everyone, said: "I'm awfully sorry for what

happened last night. I did have too much to drink. I'm afraid I made you all very ashamed of me. The best thing I can suggest is that I go back to New York on the next boat."

Redcliffe coughed. "Well, I don't know. What do you say, *Félicité*?"

Sandra's head jerked up. A flush of annoyance chased the paleness out of her face. What did her father mean by referring such a matter to the Frenchwoman?

"No, I do not t'ink," *Félicité* said decisively. "The *pauvre chérie* 'as 'ad too mooch of that old aunt in New York. That is why she behave so bad; she has not been taught 'ow the young demoiselle should conduct 'erself. She 'as no mama and as good as no papa with you out 'ere and 'er in New York, my Clifford. But if she stay 'ere with us, she will 'ave 'er papa, and though I am almost of an age with her I shall be the new mama to 'er."

"What?" Sandra said in a very faint voice.

Redcliffe coughed again, and his face went as red as the hibiscus flowers on the sideboard.

"*Félicité* has done me the honor of consenting to be my wife," he said pompously. But he looked terrified and he didn't dare meet Sandra's eyes.

"But, Father——" Sandra began.

Félicité said determinedly: "I am sure you are very 'appy, are you not, *chérie*? We shall be very 'appy, too, your papa and I. He very

mooch love me, and I understand heem. We shall be marry very soon and we shall welcome you, Sandra, to live in the 'ouse. You may be a very clevaire young lady, but I t'ink there is mooch I can teach you."

Now that the first shock of the announcement was over Sandra did not feel so upset about it as she would have imagined. She looked from her father's flushed, embarrassed face to the quiet smile of determination on the little French-woman's countenance. Certainly her father would have to toe the narrow path during his declining years; on the other hand, she did not think that Felicité would make him unhappy. She would undoubtedly run the house well since she was obviously thrifty, as were most French-women, and, more than likely, there was in her all the domestic virtue of the typical French provincial housewife. Also Sandra felt that although Felicité had no illusions about life she was a decent sort at heart. She had tried to save her face the night Sir Hugo had announced Ashley's engagement to June, and now her insistence that Sandra make her home with them, although impossible, was touching. Impulsively she got up from her place and went round and kissed her new stepmother.

"I *am* glad about it," she said warmly. "And I do think you and Father will be happy."

Felicité looked startled and then oddly embarrassed. She looked for a moment rather like a

little stray dog who, having been accustomed to kicks most of its life, is frightened and confused by a kindly action. But a few seconds later she recovered her serenity and said: "That is kind of you, *chérie*. I shall not forget."

June had left the Fleurie by the time Sandra arrived. There was nothing for it but to go and see her at the Embassy. Perhaps on the whole that was an advantage. The interview there must be necessarily short. She turned the green car in at the Embassy gates and drove up before the house. She had just got out of the car and was about to ring the doorbell when the door opened and Ashley came out.

He stood stock still when he saw Sandra. His face whitened under its coating of tan, but his voice was casual, even faintly derisive, as he said: "Hello, Sandra. Come to pay me a call?"

"No." Her voice, too, was on the defensive, even angry. "I came to see Miss Martin."

"Don't give her another black eye, will you? I can't have the facial beauty of my bride completely marred before Sunday."

"Why Sunday?" Her sudden dread sense of premonition was stronger than her resentment.

"Didn't you know? But perhaps you had retired before I issued the invitation—a general one, so of course you're included. June and I are being married on Sunday. At three in the afternoon, and the reception is to be afterward at the Paris Club."

"I—I didn't know it was going to be so soon."

"You made that pretty inevitable, didn't you?"

"I made what inevitable?"

"The wedding. I mean the urgency for speed. If you want to crush down one scandal, give people something else to talk about. Not very subtle, but a fact. Well, treat my fiancée gently, won't you, darling?" His face slipped sideways in a grin which had a mocking quality; he touched his hat in a jaunty way, and was gone.

Sandra choked literally. Had he taken a whip and flogged her he couldn't have hurt her more—or as much. She felt as though she had died a hundred deaths. But death would have been a merciful release from the way she felt then. She bit her lower lip and fought for control and succeeded in gaining it so that when, a few moments later, she rang the bell she was quiet and composed. She was even faintly smiling.

June was working in her office. How she kept her mind on the documents she was trying to type she didn't know. She'd type away furiously for a few minutes, then her fingers would lag, and she'd sit motionless. Sometimes, even, the keys she was trying to follow would become blurred, then she'd brush a hand across her eyes and curse herself heartily. If she had told herself once that morning she had told herself a hundred times that she had nothing whatsoever to worry about. In fact, that episode last night—

though horribly embarrassing—had brought things to a happy climax. Ashley and she were being married on Sunday. *They were being married on Sunday.* She said that to herself, too, aloud sometimes, and each time it made her catch her breath in a scared sort of way, as though she couldn't believe it even yet. The very idea had been at the end of a rainbow for so long she couldn't convince herself it was actually about to happen. But this was Friday. There was only today to be got through somehow, then tomorrow, and the next day would be Sunday. Nothing could possibly happen in that short intervening time. Nothing.

It had been as much of a surprise to her as anyone when Ashley made his dramatic announcement last night. It had even driven out both the mental and physical shock of the blow Sandra had delivered. She hadn't had the least notion that Ashley was contemplating such an early wedding, but as he said it his eyes had met hers, and his eyes seemed to say to her: "Play up."

June wouldn't have been June if she hadn't responded to that plea and done it most convincingly too. She smiled charmingly and accepted everyone's good wishes and seemed to forget that there was a livid red mark across one of her cheeks that was really quite painful.

Everything had gone so smoothly after the dramatic episode that it was odd she should feel

almost afraid of being alone with Ashley. But the party ended, and there was nothing for it but for her to get into his car when he held the door open for her and prepare herself to be driven home.

"Thanks for your support, June," he had said as he turned the car out of the restaurant grounds. "I hope you don't think I am rushing you unduly when I announce it is to be on Sunday."

"No. I suppose since we are to be married we might as well *be* married and get it over." Only that was wildly funny. To talk about her marriage to Ashley like that!

"The girl's got sense, I see. We've got to put on some sort of show afterward, so it might as well be at the Paris Club. I'm a member and they have quite a decent room one can hire."

"Yes. . . . It should be fun."

He smiled crookedly. "For everyone else. I doubt if any wedding is much fun for the bride and groom. But it's got to be gone through."

"Ashley."

"Yes?"

"Where--where are we going for our honeymoon?"

"Honeymoon?" Was his voice really harsh or was that her imagination? "Yes, I suppose we must have a honeymoon of sorts. It's the conventional thing. Everyone might feel a bit embar-

rassed if they saw us about here for a couple of days afterward."

"We might—we might go to your hut on the other side of the island."

"No!" The word shot out of him. And then he laughed, soft covering laughter. "The hut's a bit primitive for a honeymoon, don't you think? I thought we might fly to San Marino. You haven't been there, have you? It's quite a gay little spot, music halls, cabarets, and one or two decent hotels."

"That—would be nice." She tried to keep the disappointment out of her voice. She had pictured this honeymoon with Ashley and always it had been in that cabin of his on the half crescent of sand with the palm trees screening it. She had seen them sitting out on the small porch, on the one step, her hand in his, the night like an inverted bowl, full of stars and moonlight. And suddenly she had a queer feeling that if she couldn't have her honeymoon with Ashley there she didn't want to have a honeymoon with him at all. Certainly not in San Marino with its luxury hotels, its cabarets, and its music halls.

But she said nothing further about the honeymoon and neither did he. Only one reference was made to that incident that had brought all this to a head. "Hope your cheek isn't still smarting, June," he remarked.

"No. I suppose I must accustom myself to getting knocked about by your lady friends. That's

what comes of marrying a glamour boy." She laughed very creditably.

He laughed, too, not convincingly. "I'll try not to let it recur, darling. And if you call me a glamour boy again I'll sock you!"

When she heard that faint knock and the door opened and Sandra came in she stared at her visitor as though she couldn't believe her eyes. That it should be Sandra after last night and that Sandra should have come to the embassy! "That dame's got nerve enough for anything," she thought, but the next moment she had to go back on that. She had seen Sandra's face. It wasn't nerve that had brought her here. She thought and didn't want to think it: "I guess she's about as miserable as I am." But quickly she tried to unthink that, because she hadn't dared admit that she was miserable.

"Well?" she said. Her hands slid from the keys, but she didn't get up or even move her body.

"I—I came to apologize," Sandra said.

"Oh." She knew that sounded ungracious, but she didn't feel gracious. She felt anything but gracious. She didn't want Sandra to apologize to her. She didn't want to feel sorry for her. She wanted to dislike her and despise her and think of her as an arrogant American girl who had far more money than sense.

"I don't expect you to accept my apology. I don't see why you should. And I'm not apolo-

gizing because it's the thing to do. I—I really mean it. I know I behaved disgracefully and you had every excuse for saying what you did to me. I should have taken it. I—I shouldn't have hit you."

"You were drunk," June said.

"Yes," Sandra agreed, "but that isn't an excuse. I came to ask what you want me to do."

"What I want you to do?"

"Yes." Sandra swallowed an obstruction in her throat and went on, "I could go away at once back to America if that would help. Do you think it would help?"

"You mean," June said, her voice hostile again, "you wouldn't be able to run after Ashley any more."

A hot color flooded Sandra's cheeks. "I—I suppose I have been chasing him, haven't I?"

The frank admission swept away some of June's antagonism, but not all of it. "Well, rather, I should say." And she couldn't resist adding: "But I'm fairly used to that. You're not the only woman out here who has flung herself at his head."

The color crept higher, right to Sandra's temples. There was a pause, then she said slowly: "No, I don't suppose I am."

"If every woman who had lost her head over him left this island the population would be sadly depleted, I'm afraid," June went on, digging the knife in farther and twisting it.

But Sandra's new penitent mood wouldn't quite stand for that.

She said with a return of her former spirit: "In that case there's no need for me to leave. Perhaps we could form a club. The women who have made fools of themselves over Ashley Wood."

"I should be president," June thought with misery and bitterness, but she said nothing aloud.

The pause dragged. Sandra's defiance went, and the wretchedness overcame her again. "I am still sorry it happened," she offered quietly. "And I am trying to wish that you and Ashley will be happy."

There was an honesty about that latter remark that touched even June. "Thank you," she said and added, her lips twisting faintly: "Then you're not expecting anything to happen to prevent my marrying Ashley on Sunday?"

"What could happen?"

"I'm asking you."

"Ashley told me he would never marry me," Sandra said slowly.

"I see. When did he tell you that?"

"The last time was the night Sir Hugo announced your engagement."

June's face whitened slowly. "Did that hurt your pride?"

"Not my pride," Sandra said.

There was another pause. "We seem in danger of taking down our back hair," June sug-

gested. "And I'd prefer we didn't—at least if we are both to live out here."

"I shan't be living out here. Not after Father marries Felicité."

"Oh, she's going to marry him?" June remarked with a certain show of interest.

"Yes. I'm—I'm pleased."

"You seem to have a great deal of the milk of human kindness in your heart all of a sudden. I may be wrong, but I didn't think you cared for Mademoiselle Perrier."

"I didn't—but I like her now."

June's lips twisted faintly again. "Perhaps you'll even like me at some future date."

"I hope I shall," Sandra said.

There was nothing more to say; she felt she should go. She wasn't sure whether her apology had been a success—even that it had been accepted. Well, she couldn't blame June. In the circumstances she doubted whether she would have behaved any differently—or as well.

Sandra turned toward the door, but before she had reached it June said: "You'll come to the wedding?"

Sandra swung back toward her. Almost she could have hit her again and then, as before, her anger died. "I don't think I shall." There was a note in her voice that twisted June's heart and made her angry too.

"I should," she advised. "It's the only way to

crush down the scandal. Show *you* don't care, then nobody cares. I'll play up, if you come."

"Thank you," Sandra said.

She really went then, and June returned to her typing and, of course, did none of it. She sat staring dully in front of her and watched the sunlight creep up the far wall. "She's nice." She said it aloud and hated to make the admission. It didn't alter things—or did it? "Poor kid." She said that, too, and went on: "I don't suppose she knew much about life and nothing at all about love until she met Ashley. Then she learned too much and too quickly. He can be a devil."

She wondered what had happened that night at his hut between him and Sandra and could almost imagine it. And she wondered, too, with a sinking sensation inside her, if there would be other Sandras and perhaps much stupider and not half so nice Sandras as the years went by—for Ashley always would attract women enormously. He liked them too. Whatever he said, he liked women and his power over them. She did not blame him—he wouldn't have been Ashley Wood if he hadn't been like that, and she would never have loved him—but now, on the threshold of marrying him, she thought dully about the future. Other women, other Sandras possibly . "But he wouldn't be like that if he loved me," she thought. She sprang to her feet because suddenly she could no longer bear to sit still, and just for a moment she envied the girl

who had just left the room—the girl who wasn't marrying Ashley Wood.

Chapter 21

JUNE didn't put off her proposed flight with Peter. It would have been the logical thing to do, for she was being married to another man the next day and she had quite a lot to get done. She told herself she didn't postpone it because she was keen on experiencing flying, forgetting, perhaps, that she was to experience that same pleasure the very next afternoon when she and Ashley would fly to San Marino on their honeymoon.

But she knew she wanted to talk to Peter, and up in an airplane was as good a place as any. The trouble was she wasn't sure what she wanted to talk to him about, but at the back of her mind was a feeling that if only she could convince him that she was doing the right thing in marrying Ashley, then it was the right thing to do.

It was a little odd that Peter should come into her scheme of things, but although when they did meet they usually fought, she had a very warm feeling in her heart for him and she did feel, despite everything, he was her friend.

He called for her at three in the afternoon in

Redcliffe's second car and drove her out to the small flying field on the west side of the town where the mechanic had the plane ready.

She was gay, even flippant, on the drive.

"I hope that old plane of yours is fairly safe. I don't want to miss my wedding tomorrow."

"Well, almost each time I've taken her up I've managed to have some sort of an accident, but apart from that I'd say she was reasonably safe."

"You make my blood run cold. Why not take the mechanic along with us?"

"A greasy mechanic isn't my idea of the ideal companion when one takes a pleasant Saturday-afternoon jaunt with a lady."

"Oh, you're going to do your stuff, are you? Can one steer a plane with one hand? It sounds nice and suicidal."

"I haven't been exactly tempted to before—but I don't mind trying."

"What? Not when you flew your ravishing fiancée—I beg your pardon, your ex-fiancée—down here?"

"Sandra sat beside me and read a book on the *Living Conditions of the African Savage*, a sort of prelude to Karpeti!"

"She seems to have taken time off from her studying lately." She couldn't resist that gibe.

But it didn't annoy him. He laughed amusedly. "Yes, she gave up theorizing and tried some practical experiments in living. Her glasses fell off and got broken that time we crashed near

Wood's hut. Do you know, I think that was symbolical."

"Did she need to wear glasses?"

"Not really. They were one of the appendages a supercivilization had foisted on her. She was almost imprisoned behind them, I often felt—at least her soul was. But when they fell off and broke the moment she hit Karpeti, literally, she became a free soul."

"Humph," she commented. "There have been times when I've thought she rather overdid the free-soul stunt!"

He laughed again, and she was a little surprised that he wasn't annoyed at her taunts against Sandra. Was he still as much in love with her? She found this question an engrossing one, and it occupied her mind until they arrived at the flying field.

The plane was lying out ready on the field, and the mechanic and his assistant had the engine warmed up. A silver plane with its wings glittering in the sunlight. A small cabin luxury plane, the toy of a very rich young man. June thought this and then thought, almost with a sense of shock, that Peter was a very rich young man. Virtually a millionaire. Somehow when she was with him she never could believe it; he was so very ordinary in the nicest possible way. She had always felt scared before when she had been out with young men who had too much money, as though their money set them somehow apart.

Possibly she felt this because money, or rather the lack of it, had loomed so large in her life even during her childhood. It was always staggering, even frightening, to her to think of a person who could literally order anything he or she wanted without counting the cost.

The plane took off easily and rose toward a blue cloudless sky. After the first sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach passed, June decided she was going to enjoy it. They were flying over the island, and the purple hilltops looked like a child's rather amateurish efforts with plasticine. Everything looked very small, like a Noah's-ark country, and as she sat beside Peter peering down through one of the side windows, she had a feeling that everything that had happened down there recently was very small too. Small and almost insignificant, which was odd and not reasonable. But sailing here, far above Karpeti, feeling one had but to reach up a hand and touch the blue sky, she felt almost impersonal toward everything and everybody. Even Ashley? She didn't ask herself that. Curiously she found she didn't want to think of him that afternoon, and certainly she didn't want to think of her marriage which was taking place tomorrow.

Peter made it awfully easy for her not to think about either. He described to her his home in New York—one of the few remaining old houses in a certain section between Park and Madison

avenues; he told her about his parents, his mother who was usually off on some lecture tour, and his father who lived mostly on their estate in South Carolina because he was keen on hunting. Peter was the only child, and she sensed that he had had a lonely childhood. It had thrown him into the company of books and had made him of a studious turn of mind. No one, however, could describe him as bookish. There was too much real sense of fun and enjoyment of living in him.

She wondered fleetingly what it would be like to be married to him and go back and live the life one would live as his wife in New York. It would be a very pleasant life, she decided. There would be exclusive though quite perfect little dinner parties, a box at the opera during the season, first-night seats and supper at a big hotel afterward. Shopping during the daytime with a sleek town limousine at one's beck and call, a chauffeur in livery to place a soft wool rug over one's knees, luncheons in fashionable and expensive restaurants—what a life! So very different from anything she had ever known that she sighed aloud with a real sense of envy.

"Why the sigh, lady?" Peter half turned his head to ask.

Since it had concerned him, and quite intimately, she went scarlet. "Oh—ah—I was just thinking things."

"You always ought to think things that make you flush. You look lovely."

"Thank you," she murmured, at a loss for anything else to say, for she still felt confused at the direction her thoughts had taken.

"What's happened to Karpeti?" she asked. "I haven't seen anything but sea for ages."

"Karpeti is still where it was—and the same sort of things are still happening there. Does that surprise you?"

"Yes, rather," she admitted slowly. "That was one of the things I was thinking. How little everything seemed down there once one was up above it. And now it seems as though Karpeti must be in another world."

He leaned slightly toward her. "What would you say if Karpeti was in another world—and was going to remain in that other world?"

"But that's absurd."

"Don't you ever think of absurd things?"

"Yes, of course. But—"

"But me no buts, lady. Just tell me how you would feel if I suddenly told you that Karpeti was in another world, one we had left far behind."

"For good and all?"

He nodded his dark head. "For good and all."

She caught her breath. She didn't know why she should feel scared suddenly. Scared of what he had said, scared even of answering him.

She said in a faint voice: "I don't know how I should feel."

She heard him draw his own breath in sharply,

and as he did so he opened the throttle and she felt the plane move perceptibly faster through the air.

"You might even be relieved?" He wasn't looking at her any longer.

"No, no, of course I shouldn't be!" she cried quickly, even angrily. "Why should I want to leave Karpeti behind, especially now when I'm being married tomorrow?"

"I thought that might be as good a reason as any."

"Are you trying to be funny?"

"Maybe."

"Well"—her voice was really frightened now—"don't be funny that way."

"I thought that now Karpeti seemed far away we might talk about it sensibly, June."

"Talk about what sensibly?"

"Your marriage to Ashley Wood tomorrow."

"But—but what's there to talk about? It's all arranged."

"Forgive me for being trite. There's many a slip between the cup and the lip—even on the eve of a marriage."

"But I *am* marrying him."

He said: "My sense of direction is not awfully good, June. It would be annoying if I couldn't find my way back to Karpeti in time for the ceremony tomorrow."

There was a slight pause. "You *are* being funny now, aren't you?"

"Am I? Yes, I guess it would be a joke if Wood were the one waiting at the church after all. I don't suppose *that* possibility has loomed very frighteningly on *his* horizon."

"You hate him, don't you?"

"Oh no, I don't think I do. I have the sort of contempt for him that all men who aren't themselves conspicuously successful with women have for the man who is. But at the same time I know that my feeling has its roots in envy. I know for one reason I'd give a great deal to be in his shoes."

He paused, and in the pause she threw at him: "Because he has fascinated Sandra?"

He seemed to think that over. Presently he said: "No, although I admit that at one time that taunt would have been justified."

"Don't tell me you've changed your allegiance."

"And if I said I had?"

His meaning was too obvious for her even to pretend to misunderstand. "Aren't you trying to carry on rather a cheap and insincere flirtation?"

"No, because my feeling for you is neither cheap nor insincere. I don't think I'd know how to begin to flirt with you anyhow. I like you too much. One can only flirt successfully with a girl one doesn't care two hoots about—at least that's been my experience."

He sounded so sincere she could only say weakly: "Then I *don't* understand you."

"Well, it's only very lately that I've begun to understand myself," he said. "I fell in love with Sandra when I was eighteen because she was so different from any other girl I knew. I put down her complete immaturity to high ideals. I didn't think that the reason she didn't want to kiss me was that she hadn't been emotionally awakened. I thought she was such a fine character that she was holding herself for the glory of marriage. I realize now my conception of her was most unfair to her. She was just a normal, nice girl who had had her emotional life thwarted by an impossible old aunt who was full of emotional complexes herself. I worshiped Sandra as someone far above me, the Unattainable She. I don't think I seriously thought she'd ever marry me until she actually proposed to me one night at the Stork Club. I should have been in heaven and even imagined I was, but I know now one of my chief sensations was a sense of anticlimax. Don't misunderstand me; I loved her all right. I still do, but differently. If you weren't so prejudiced against her you would see that Sandra is a very lovable person—absurd in some ways, but lovable."

"So you see," he went on presently, "it's not so farfetched as it may sound when I say that in a way I've altered my allegiance."

"I don't know whether you expect me to be flattered," she began in a wary voice, when he interrupted sharply:

"Of course I don't expect you to be flattered! I'm merely stating a plain truth." He paused and said slowly: "I think I'm falling in love with you, June."

She said: "This is scarcely an appropriate time to tell me that when I'm being married to another man tomorrow."

He smiled faintly. "After tomorrow would be even less an appropriate time."

"You don't expect me to take you seriously, Peter?"

She was looking at him sideways and she saw his nicely molded lips tighten. "I don't expect you to; I mean you to."

"You're not, by any chance, going to try any cave-man tactics?"

"I'm not dragging you off to my lair where I shall stand guard over you with a club, if that's what you mean. I'm flying you to Havana; as you know, that's the capital of Cuba. I'm going to make slight engine trouble the excuse for landing, and a few hundred dollars invested skillfully will iron out any difficulties. Anyhow, I have *my* passport, and Cubans are conveniently incurious about ladies accompanying American gentlemen."

There was a slight pause.

"And apart from having Cuban officials believe I'm your light of love, what else do you propose to do with me?"

"I intend to reserve a suite for you at the best

hotel, to take you out to dinner and afterward to somewhere gay and exciting to dance, and in between whiles I hope to convince you that you'd do far better to marry me instead of Ashley Wood."

"You don't mean financially, by any chance?"

"No. I'm sufficiently vain not to mean financially." He smiled slightly. "There are a few other considerations in my favor."

"You won't think me unduly dense if I ask what they are?"

"Well, as I said, I'm in love with you."

He saw her face whiten. She said through her teeth: "You're trying to tell me that Ashley isn't."

"I'm not trying to tell you anything," he said gently. "I merely wanted to get you away from Karpeti for one night so that you could think the whole thing over in a different environment."

There was another pause. "Now that little comedy piece is over, would you mind turning your plane round—or whatever one does to a plane—and taking me straight back?"

"I'd mind very much. Anyhow, I've no intention of doing it. We're headed for Havana. We should be there in less than an hour."

"Don't you think you're stepping out of character? I don't believe the young Lochinvar role suits you very well."

"I admit it would suit Wood better—if he ever

loved a woman sufficiently to take that much trouble over her."

"Envy complex again?"

"Maybe. But since the role doesn't suit me, I may get results. Have you ever noticed that in life most big stunts are usually carried through by the most unlikely people? Think of all the odd little civilians who are the heroes of the present battle for Britain. Don't think I'm classing myself with them for a minute. I shouldn't presume. They're in a class by themselves. I'm merely trying to say that since I'm not the hero type—rather the scholar—I may be able to carry through this absurdly heroic stunt."

After they had landed at the Cuban airport June asked herself why she hadn't made more fuss, why she hadn't *insisted* he fly her straight back to Princeville. But there was something about Peter's doggedly stubborn attitude that made protests seem futile. She kept telling herself it was all ridiculous; no man deliberately abducted a girl in this day and age, but the fact remained that here she was in Havana with no means of getting back to Karpeti in time for her wedding tomorrow unless Peter flew her back. "As of course he will when he comes to his senses," she thought.

But in the meantime she had to admit that the situation was not without a certain excitement, and though she would not admit this, she felt a great deal less miserable than she had felt for

weeks. "Ashley will certainly be staggered," she thought and felt savagely pleased that he should know that another man had thought sufficiently of her to try and abduct her in order to make her change her mind about marrying him, Ashley. But along with this satisfaction came the thought that, after all, he might not care very much, and she felt the awful depression of the past days closing over her.

"I shall telephone Ashley the moment we get to the hotel," she announced as they were being driven from the flying field through the narrow cobbled streets of Havana to the principal hotel.

"Certainly, just as you wish," he said calmly. But although she had the personal call in all that afternoon and evening she was not able to contact Ashley. The message that kept coming back was that he was unavailable.

Chapter 22

AROUND FIVE O'CLOCK that same afternoon a native in Ashley's pay and whom he trusted came to him with the news. There were strange goings on in a certain spot in the interior; native bearers were being engaged by foreign gentlemen; the underground cellars of an old manor

house were being used for storing, though the native had no idea what was being stored there. But the bearers had been told to report for duty there the following evening. "There's a chance of catching them red-handed—or at least gathering enough definite information to force the government to take action," Ashley decided.

Then he remembered his wedding tomorrow and cursed. Would he have time to get to the place and back by then? Ashley wouldn't have been Ashley if he hadn't decided to risk it. But of course he must let June know. When he arrived at the Fleurie, Madame Dupont told him that Miss Martin was out. He cursed for the second time that day and scribbled a note for her.

On his way round to the garage to get his car he remembered that Peter had been over that same territory very recently. He wondered if the young American had noticed anything that might be helpful. It would only cause him a very few minutes' delay to stop in at Plantation House and have a word with him. He found Redcliffe and Sandra on the porch, but there was no sign of Peter. He was reluctant for more reasons than one to get out of his car but, pressed by Redcliffe, he agreed to stop for a few moments and drink a sundowner with them.

He explained guardedly what he wanted with Peter, and then he remembered that someone had told him that Sandra herself had been over that same territory recently with her ex-fiancé.

"I suppose you didn't notice anything unusual, Miss Redcliffe?" he said. "No signs of any Nazis in the vicinity?"

Suddenly the incident at the *bombash* and what Peter's servant had said afterward came back to Sandra's mind. "Why, yes," she said, and she repeated the story the boy had told them about the foreign gentleman being there to engage bearers at a very good pay. By Ashley's expression she knew that he was interested. She showed him as nearly as she could on a map just where Peter and she had camped. She told him about the old manor house and certain strange noises she had heard during the night which Peter had teased her about afterward. He had slept soundly and hadn't heard them.

"That's probably their headquarters," Ashley said. He rose to his feet. "Well, I'll be going."

Sandra stepped off the porch with him and walked beside him to where his car was parked. In the presence of her father they had spoken fairly normally, but now they were both silent, an unfriendly, almost a hostile, silence.

"It's a long drive. Do you think you'll get back in time for your wedding tomorrow?" Sandra suggested presently.

"It's not my habit to keep ladies waiting at the church."

"No, but you might this time."

"If I don't get back it will be because I won't be in a fit state to marry anyone," he said grimly.

"You—you think it may be dangerous?" Her voice was small and suddenly frightened.

"Not so dangerous as many of the things I've done in my life—not half so dangerous as standing here talking to you, for instance."

Her pale face colored vividly. "That's not very kind."

"But flattering. What woman wouldn't rather be flattered than be treated gently?"

"I hate you when you talk like that, Ashley."

His face slipped sideways in a grin. "Then you must hate me most of the time. And that's as well." He frowned down at her. "I'm hoping I may be able to hate you, Sandra."

He knew he should open the door of his car, climb in, and be gone. But he knew, too, he had never wanted to do anything less, possibly because he knew this was and must be good-by. They might meet often in the future, at parties, at people's houses, but they must never meet and experience this strange, frightening silence, this compelling awareness of the other.

"Sandra." Something had leaped to his eyes. His voice was uncertain.

"Yes?" There was the same note in her voice, the same look in her eyes.

"Nothing." He held out his hand. "Good-by."

She gave him her hand. She said: "Take care of yourself," and added, almost humbly: "And I do hope you'll be happy after tomorrow."

He squeezed her hand. "Bless you, darling."

He was gone, and she could only stand there and feel that the whole world had ceased, that there was no longer any sunshine, that there would be no moon or stars at night. She turned back into the house and wondered how she was going to live through the remainder of that afternoon and the next day and the procession of days that stretched meaninglessly before her.

The fact that June couldn't get Ashley on the telephone didn't prevent her going out to dinner with Peter. It was odd on the face of it. She even felt herself that to maintain an angry silence in her bedroom would have been the right retort to what had happened. Peter had not only forcibly abducted her, but he was trying to wreck her whole life. For the culmination and purpose of her whole life was to marry Ashley Wood surely. Yet when Peter knocked at the door of the very magnificent suite he had taken for her at the Grand Hotel and said in his quite charming, diffident way: "You're not going to disappoint me about dinner, are you? I thought we'd dine below and go on to a very good cabaret they've recommended," she heard herself say: "Yes, that would be nice," before she remembered it would have been much more fitting to her resolve to have refused to dine with him—even to have refused to have touched food at all.

But June was, in most things, a healthy, sensible

young woman, and she had a healthy, sensible young woman's appetite.

Not only did they have one of the best tables in the dining room, but there was a spray of orchids beside her plate, and each course that was placed before her was quite marvelous and unlike food one could get in Karpeti. The dining room was gay with American tourists, rich Cubans, and a Cuban orchestra. There was a cosmopolitan atmosphere which was missing in Princeville.

Peter was so very nice too. It was queer to keep on thinking how nice he was when he had done this dreadful thing to her. She tried to whip up her hatred, or at least her resentment—but he thought of her comfort and enjoyment in so many hundreds of little ways, she couldn't hate or even resent anything about him very successfully. She believed she would still marry Ashley Wood—and tomorrow too—but tonight was a night apart from her life, a most ridiculous night, but it was extraordinarily pleasant.

After dinner they went on to the Cuban Club where there was a half-Cuban and half-American cabaret. June didn't feel self-conscious, for so many of the women tourists weren't dressed either. That the Cuban women—mostly startlingly beautiful—had long black gowns with high combs and some with mantillas added to the romance of the surroundings.

For they were romantic. A Cuban cabaret,

with its dark lovely women, its exotic dancers, its perfect service, is as romantic as any night club in the world. From the big uncurtained windows beside which June and Peter were sitting they could look out over the harbor and see the fairy lights on the ships and the moon making the water a dull silver. Some of those ships were going straight back to New York, June thought, back to Peter's home, back to the life she had fleetingly imagined as his wife, the exclusive little dinners, the lovely house off Park Avenue, everything so very right and easy and safe. And happy. It was strange, but that thought persisted. A happy life.

Yes, one would be happy married to Peter, she decided. He was so comfortable and sane and kind. They danced; they drank champagne; they collected colorful but absurd favors. They sat in the darkened room and watched the spotlight play upon two Cuban dancers who did a rumba as only Cubans can do a rumba, danced it with its intricate steps, its primitive barbarism, its pulsating rhythm. The girl wore a scarlet gown, tight to the knees, from where it fell to her feet in a cascade of frills. There was an enormous comb in her hair. The man wore skin-tight trousers of black satin and a full white satin shirt. It was after two when Peter and June left.

It seemed incredible to June that, in the circumstances, the evening could have gone like

that, swiftly, easily. Peter had said nothing that any young man who was taking her out for an evening's fun might not have said—oddly, she had said nothing either. But back at the hotel they were sharply reminded of the situation when the clerk at the desk told her that Mr. Ashley Wood was still unavailable and should he keep in the call?

June hesitated. "No," she said. "I'll put in another in the morning."

She felt enormously relieved at that decision. She would have the whole night to make her mind up in, and that was the first time she admitted to herself that her determination to marry Ashley had weakened. She did not know why this should be other than she had been strangely happy and at peace with herself that evening. At the door of her suite Peter asked if he might come in for a few minutes, and she said: "Yes."

The sitting room opened out onto a balcony. The doors were wide open, letting in the warm night air, and the stars and the moon looked as though they were hanging on a drop scene of black velvet. Peter put his arm about her shoulders—and at the time it seemed quite a natural gesture—and led her through the doors out onto the balcony. There were still lights in the small capital; they sparkled like jewels on a velvet cushion. The air was warm and rich and soft on their faces. They stood there for some minutes and neither spoke.

Peter didn't speak even when he took her in his arms and held her closely to him. Not at first. But the pressure of his arms said a great deal, and the tenderness with which he held her said a great deal too. When finally he spoke his words were surprising.

"Poor little June," he said. "You've come home, haven't you?"

She stirred in his arms. "I don't know what you mean."

"Don't you? I've thought often of what you told me about yourself, about your having had no home life and having had to start struggling for yourself when most girls are putting on white debutante frocks and being petted and feted. I've thought how brave you were and gay. And I've wanted so much to be allowed to look after you. I've wanted to give you wonderful things and take you to wonderful places. I know it would always be fun doing things for you—there's so much eagerness for life in you. June dear, dear little June." He was kissing her lips as she had dreamed that Ashley might kiss them someday, but he never had. Not even now they were engaged and on the verge of being married. She lay in Peter's arms and let him kiss her, and the sense of peace, the dawn of a new happiness she had been vaguely conscious of all evening, enveloped her. She didn't think in those minutes. She was scarcely conscious of the fact that her arms had gone shyly about his neck and that she

had brought his dark head down to her shoulder.

Neither of them heard the knock on the door. They were both startled when they heard the page boy's voice say:

"The señor is wanted on the telephone by Miss Sandra Redcliffe. Will the señor take the call in here?"

June gave a small cry and sprang away from him. Her cheeks were blazing; her eyes were blazing.

"Then *she* knew you were here! You'd arranged it with her! What was the idea? To save Ashley for *her*?"

"What on earth are you talking about?" Peter demanded.

"Her call to you. You'd planned this whole stunt together. You're still in love with her; you must be to do this for her. And I thought—I thought—" Her voice choked.

"Will the señor take the call in here? It has been put through," the boy repeated patiently. He looked bored, as though scenes such as this were his daily fare.

"Yes, *I'll* take the call," June said.

As she spoke she ran in from the balcony and seized up the telephone which stood on a small low table near the couch. She said into the receiver, controlling her voice with an effort and enunciating overclearly:

"It may interest you to know that your stunt hasn't come off. I shall be back in time for my

wedding to Ashley tomorrow. Peter will fly me back. You might see that everything is ready—and give my bridegroom my love.”

And without giving Sandra a chance to reply she slammed down the receiver.

Chapter 23

IT WAS shortly after twelve the following morning that Sir Hugo arrived up at Plantation House. He often came up on a Sunday morning to drink rum punch with Redcliffe, but this particular Sunday he appeared to be perturbed.

He said, mopping his brow—it was a close, hot morning—“Bless my soul if I know what to make of it. There’s Ashley disappeared, gone off Lord alone knows where, and June’s not at the Fleurie and hasn’t been there all night. Such carryings-on, the night before their wedding too! Not that I have any information that they’re *together*.”

“They’re not.” It was Sandra’s voice which cut into the conversation. “June is with Peter. They went out on a flight, had engine trouble, and had to come down in Havana, but they expect to be back in time for the ceremony.”

“They expect to be back in time for the ceremony,” Sir Hugo spluttered. “You’d think she was merely one of the guests instead of the

bride! Why did she want to go off gallivanting in an airplane with another young man the very day before she was to marry Ashley? Lord love my soul, it's all very well to be modern, but I think that's carrying modernity a bit too far."

"No nice-brought-up young girl in *la belle* France would do such a thing," Felicité said virtuously.

"Not openly perhaps," Sir Hugo said testily, nettled at her criticism of one of his fellow countrywomen. He turned toward Sandra. "Can you think what the idea was?"

"No, I can't," Sandra said quietly.

It was a problem that had been exercising her mind all that night. And what a night it had been! No sign of Peter returning from the trial flight. She had worried herself sick all that evening, fearing that something serious had happened to him and to the plane. Then about two o'clock in the early morning she had heard the telephone ringing in the downstairs hall. She had flung on a dressing gown, run downstairs in her bedroom slippers. Was that Miss Sandra Redcliffe? the operator had asked, and when she replied in the affirmative she was told to hold the line as someone had put through a personal call to her from Havana. From Havana! That in itself was a shock, and at once she thought it must be Peter. But what was he doing in Havana? Expecting to hear Peter's voice, she had heard

instead a voice which she recognized as June's. But the girl must have gone demented! She had shouted such extraordinary things. Something about some stunt not having come off and to give Ashley her love. Then the connection went dead. Sandra was left staring down at the receiver in sheer amazement. What stunt was she talking about? What was she doing with Peter anyhow, especially in Havana? It was all very puzzling and not a little disturbing. Would another call come through? She waited down in the hall until she became quite cold. It was surprising how cold those old frame houses in Karpeti became at night. Finally, shivering, she was on her way upstairs again when the second call came through. This time it *was* Peter. He told her he had taken June up for a flight; they had been forced down in Cuba by slight engine trouble, but they were starting back first thing in the morning. He asked her not to pay any attention to what June had said; she had been hysterical. But why had she been hysterical, Sandra asked herself, unless she had been afraid she would be late for her wedding on the morrow?

Sandra went back to bed but not to sleep. Yet it was doubtful if she would have slept anyhow—the night before Ashley married June.

"And Ashley—what on earth's got into *him*?" Sir Hugo was grumbling. "Dash it all, I'm sup-

posed to give the bride away. I'll look a pretty fool if I arrive at the church all dolled up and there's nothing doing."

Sandra said nothing. Her face was very white now. She was staring straight ahead of her with big blue eyes. Felicité said with alarm: "Sandra *chérie*, what you think of? Come and 'ave a leetle cocktail. Jus' a leetle one."

"No, thank you," Sandra said. She rose to her feet and left the balcony.

Shortly after one Pèter landed his plane in the flying field outside Princeville. For the past three hours June and he had sat side by side in the small comfortable plane, and they had scarcely exchanged more than a few sentences. Neither knew what the other was thinking; on the face of things neither appeared to care. Perhaps physically and emotionally they were both too exhausted to be very conscious of what was happening. Peter controlled the plane mechanically, and June just sat staring down through the side window at the sea.

Occasionally her mind would go back unwillingly over the events of the past night. Now, in the strong morning sunlight, it all seemed incredible, and most incredible was the sense of pleasure she had had during the early part of the evening. She tried to pretend she had hated it all, every minute of it, but she knew in her heart that she hadn't—she hadn't really hated

any of it until the moment the page boy had said that Miss Sandra Redcliffe was on the telephone. She still went cold at the thought of how she had rushed into the room and hurled accusations at Sandra. That was the second time, and recently, that she had lost control of herself. She couldn't understand it. She had been in Peter's arms and just for a moment she had felt safe and happy—and then had come the shattering belief that it was all part of a scheme between him and Sandra, a scheme for setting Ashley free so that Sandra could marry him. She hadn't stopped to wonder if it were logical that Peter should have gone to such lengths purely for Sandra's sake. That Sandra should have known where to find him had seemed conclusive evidence. And the moment she had put down the receiver she had gone to pieces. She had given a little choking sob and thrown herself down on the couch. She had buried her face in her hands and started to sob. Peter had stood over her, his face strangely expressionless. He didn't tell her immediately that it was he who had put the call in not half an hour previously, as it had suddenly occurred to him that Sandra might be worrying on his account. Also that she might know where to find Ashley.

He had said quietly: "Then you would care if Sandra and I had arranged this together?"

She raised a tear-stained face. She sobbed out half incoherently: "Care? Of course I'd care.

You were so nice and I—I was beginning to like you so much!”

“June”—he bent closer to her and laid a tentative hand on her head—“I only put that call through half an hour ago when you couldn’t contact Ashley. Sandra didn’t know where I was—where we were.”

There was a pause while her hysterical sobbing grew quieter. Presently she murmured: “I—I suppose I’ve made a fool of myself, Peter.”

“No—nothing like that, June. But we *are* flying back to Karpeti first thing in the morning. We’ve got to get this whole mess straightened out.”

“I suppose you want to go to the Fleurie first?” Peter asked.

She said: “Yes.” She didn’t know what he meant by that “first” and she didn’t ask him. But when he had driven Redcliffe’s second-best car up before the hotel where she lived and she saw that he was preparing to drive away again, she blurted out, as though unable to control herself: “Don’t you want to know what I’m going to do?”

She felt his steady brown eyes on her face. “Very much, June, but I’m not going to ask you. Last night I did all I could to show you how I felt, and now the decision must rest with you. I don’t want to force it; on the other hand”—he smiled slightly—“you haven’t a great

deal of time. It is now nearly two, and the ceremony, I understand, is scheduled for three o'clock. I shall be up at Plantation House if you want me." He got into the car and drove away.

She was surprised. She was also resentful. "It would serve him right if I did marry Ashley," she thought, and that was the first time she had admitted to herself that she might not marry Ashley Wood.

Madame Dupont gave her the note Ashley had hastily scribbled the preceding afternoon. "Am on a hot trail, June," he had written. "I think this time I may catch them red-handed and force the government at last to take action. I'm off into the interior; it's some distance, but I'll drive like a maniac to get back in time for our date tomorrow. In case I don't, you'll be lucky. You'll possibly be rid of me for good and all."

She stared down at the note and felt quite cold, then she fled to the telephone to find out if he were back. But although she telephoned everywhere, the answer was the same. He had not been seen since the previous afternoon.

She didn't wait even to go up to her room. She backed Alexander out of the garage and was at the embassy in record time, knocking on the door of Sir Hugo's room, where he was enjoying his "five minutes after lunch," as he called it, which was so often half an hour or even three quarters.

"Bless my soul!" he said as he blinked at her. "What are you doing here now, my dear? And you're not dressed. At least I hope you're not dressed." He was looking at the very crumpled linen suit she was wearing.

"It's about Ashley," she said. "He hasn't come back."

"Not *yet*? I knew he wasn't back when I sat down to luncheon. Most unusual procedure. *Most* unusual."

"He thinks he may be able to get the information we want about whoever is supplying that raider," she said. "He left a note at my hotel, but I've only just got it. I've—I've been away."

"Ah yes, I heard that at the Redcliffes' this morning. You and young Slade were forced down in Cuba with engine trouble, weren't you? Not that I approve of a young girl going out with another young man on the very eve of her wedding—but modern times, modern times. In *my* youth, however——"

"But we must do something about Ashley, Sir Hugo," June broke in desperately. Sir Hugo's youth was to him an inexhaustible, and to others an extremely boring, subject. And just at the moment June felt if he said another word about it she would scream.

"Yes, something must be done," Sir Hugo agreed vaguely. "But the point is, will he be back in time for the ceremony? Hang it all, I

don't want to stand there like a blasted fool in all my regalia waiting at the church door!"

June said: "There isn't going to be any wedding, Sir Hugo. I'm sorry, it's going to be beastly for us and annoying for everyone, but things have happened—anyhow, the wedding is off."

"Bless my soul!" he spluttered, staring at her. "It's said that a lady's capable of changing her mind at the very last minute, but this *is* the very last minute, what?"

"I'm sorry," she said again, her voice breaking slightly. "But there can't be any wedding now. And I'm sorry, but you'll have to tell everyone—that is, if you don't mind telling them."

By Sir Hugo's expression it would seem that he did. He very much enjoyed giving good news out, but to have to disappoint guests at a wedding and incidentally inform them that there would be no wedding feast and consequently no champagne was a different matter.

"Well, really, I don't think—" He flustered. "Are you sure you know what you are doing, my dear? To disappoint so many people who have come prepared for a wedding. Are you certain that Ashley won't manage to be back in time?"

"It has nothing to do with Ashley," she said, her voice raw and edged. "I know now I can't marry him." She might have added: "As I knew all along in my heart."

"There, there"—he patted her shoulder—

"don't be upset, though all these happenings are *most* out-of the ordinary."

"Then you *will* tell everyone?"

He coughed. "Well, if you *insist*, though Lord love my soul if I know how I'm going to begin doing it."

"I'm sure you'll manage it, Sir Hugo, as you manage everything, so tactfully—and beautifully."

His annoyance vanished. "Well, perhaps I do. Perhaps I do. Anyhow I'll do my best." He was wearing his pleased, Santa Claus expression again.

She turned and was about to go when he said: "It's queer about Ashley—where he's gone to, I mean. Redcliffe told me that he'd called there yesterday afternoon. He thought young Slade might be able to help him. He'd gone recently over the same territory, it seems."

"He said *that*?"

"Yes, something of the sort. Though why Ashley should go off like that without consulting *me*—"

June didn't wait to hear any more. She was out again in Alexander and on her way up to Plantation House.

Peter saw her drive up and ran down off the porch to meet her.

"June?" There was such hope in his voice that for a moment she didn't speak; she couldn't. She thought, "That's how I loved Ashley," and used the past tense without realizing it.

She said almost prosaically, "The wedding's off, Peter," and then hurried on breathlessly before he could comment: "Ashley hasn't come back. Oh, Peter, I feel, I *know*, something dreadful has happened to him!"

"Oh, so that's why the wedding is off," he said.

"Peter . . ." She put out a hand and touched his arm, but he didn't seem aware of it. She swallowed something in her throat and went on: "I was thinking—of your plane. Sir Hugo told me that you knew the territory into which Ashley's gone. Is there anywhere there where you could land a plane?"

He scratched his head. "I don't seem to remember. The country's awfully hilly. I can't remember any open space. But Sandra came over a slightly different route. She might have seen some place. Shall we go in and ask her?"

"Oh, so Sandra will have to come into it?" she said slowly.

"Not if you don't want her to."

She hesitated, then she shrugged. "Oh, I suppose she'll have to come into it now. I couldn't keep her out. I never seemed very successful at keeping her out anyhow." And she laughed, a little ruefully, but without bitterness.

Peter laughed, too, because the way she had laughed had been such a relief to him. "Come along." He drew her arm through his and they went inside the house together.

Sandra wasn't hostile. She was too frightened to be hostile. Too frightened and utterly miserable.

Félicité cried: "But who 'ave we 'ere? The bride? But why does she not dress 'erself for the wedding?"

"The wedding's off, Félicité," Peter said curtly.

Sandra said: "Oh." Just that. But for some reason everyone turned and stared at her, and her father got up quite hastily for him and brought her a glass of water.

"Come along into the study, Sandra," Peter said. "June and I want to talk to you."

Once they were inside Redcliffe's rather somberly furnished study Peter told her why June had come.

"There have been attempts on his life before—you remember the shooting incident," June said when he had finished. "Ashley suspects who is at the back of this organized supply of petrol and rations for the German raider, but as he is a high official here, Sir Hugo can't possibly go to the government about him until he has proof. They *know* Ashley is after that proof and they'd stop at nothing to prevent his getting it—that's the danger."

"You're telling me," Peter said grimly.

She drew a deep breath and went on: "Ashley wouldn't—wouldn't have let me down"—her face went scarlet—"unless he was prevented.

"That's why I feel that something has happened to him." Her voice died sharply.

"We could go there by car," Sandra said. "But it will take us hours and hours. I took a day and a half—but then I had to drive slowly as I didn't know the way and I had at least sixteen punctures."

"I was thinking of Peter's plane," June said, and Peter cut in: "Yes, and of course I'd be only too glad, but where the devil could I land her? Do you remember any open space, Sandra? The route you took was slightly different from the one we came back over."

"Oh, if there were only somewhere you *could* land!" June cried.

Sandra didn't say anything. She had crossed over to her father's desk. She stood with her back to them, fidgeting with some papers. "Yes, I *do* remember now," she said at last. "It is not exactly a *field* but quite a fairish-sized cleared space on the right side down the road about fifteen minutes in the car before I came to your camp, Peter. It was fairly level—I think you could land there."

"Are you talking of a skillful pilot or of me?" he asked so ruefully that both the girls laughed. That laughter cleared the air considerably. A moment later June was saying anxiously: "Then you will go, Peter?"

"Hold hard there, June. Supposing this is a wild-geese chase and that Ashley turns up

here in Princeville? He has till three o'clock."

It was Sandra who said: "But it will be three before we can possibly start, Peter. You'll probably have some things to do to the plane."

"You're right." He straightened himself with an air of decision. "We'll leave it like that then: if Ashley isn't back by three I'll try and fly you to this place, June."

"I'm coming too," Sandra said quietly.

They both turned toward her. "But look here, Sandra," Peter expostulated, "I don't see what help you could be. I'll find this landing spot—if it's where you say it is."

"All the same I'm coming," she said.

Peter looked toward June. She said to the other girl: "I'm not going to try and keep him from you once we get him safely back, Sandra."

Sandra said with a quiet dignity: "I wasn't worrying about that—or even thinking about it. All the same I'm coming."

"Well, I suppose you are then," June said.

Precisely at three o'clock, when Sir Hugo was trying to be tactful and playfully facetious on the subject of the canceled wedding and wondering rather miserably whether he was carrying it off or not, Peter took off with the two girls. The slight coolness which had followed Sandra's insistence upon coming had gone. They were both too afraid even to keep up a pretense of hostility. June knew and Sandra knew, too, that if Ashley had been physically able to he would

have got back for the wedding. There was a growing dread in both their minds, an agonizing fear.

Peter flew low and in just under two hours he sighted the old ruined manor house. Even with the grime of ages upon it, it stood out very white against the green and brown of the countryside. He circled low over the house several times.

"Doesn't look as though there were signs of activity," he commented.

"But there wouldn't be any signs," June protested. "They're too clever for that. But"—she was peering down through the side window—"I do seem to see *someone*. Yes, and there's someone else now. Oh, there are a lot of natives. I wonder if Ashley's there. I'll wave. If he sees me waving he'll know it's us." And she unwound the bright orange kerchief about her throat and waved vigorously.

"Just circle over once more, Peter," she begged a few minutes later. "If he saw me waving I'm sure he'll try and wave back and then we'd know—we'd *know* he was there. That he was—" But she didn't finish the sentence.

Peter circled over several times again, quite low.

"There's *something* doing, Peter." Her voice was high-pitched, quite excited now. "Do you see about six natives leaving the place, fleeing for their lives, I'd say, down that path toward the scrub? Looks as though we'd scared them

away. But why should they be scared? But there's still no sign of Ashley."

"He's probably left and is on his way back to Princeville," Peter suggested. No one said anything for a few moments. It was Sandra who cried shrilly: "Look, that's *smoke*, isn't it?"

"Smoke?" June's voice echoed faintly, and Peter repeated the word: "Smoke?"

"Yes, yes, it *is* smoke, and it's coming from the house."

"Someone must have felt cold and lighted a fire," Peter remarked flippantly, but oddly he didn't feel flippant.

June cried: "Yes, it *is* smoke, definitely. They've set fire to the house! But—but— Oh, Peter, go over just once again! We should be able to see something more. Ashley might still be there. He might—"

"He might be a prisoner. He might even be burned to death," Sandra interposed and added sharply: "Peter, you've got to land somewhere quickly!"

"It's all very well to say 'land somewhere quickly,'" he grumbled, "but where the devil am I going to land? Where's that clear space you spoke of? Hanged if I can see it. And what's all this talk of being burned to death? No one is burned to death these days. You've been reading too many adventure stories, Sandra."

"But things like that do happen here," June said in a stiff, small voice. "The most *dreadful*

things happen here. You'd know if you'd lived here as long as I have. And they *are* burning that house down. Oh, Peter"—her voice rose shrilly—"we must get there somehow."

He said, exasperated because of the fear in his heart:

"But how? Of course I'm quite *willing* to land. I'd like nothing better—if Sandra would show me where that cleared space was."

Sandra said then: "There wasn't any cleared space. At least I didn't know of any."

"There wasn't any cleared space?" Peter swung toward her, and the plane banked steeply off its course. "What the devil *are* you talking about? You told me—you told us——"

"I know, Peter. But I thought if I didn't tell you that you mightn't have come. I thought once we were here you'd find somewhere to land—I felt you *must* find somewhere to land."

"What, on the top of a mountain?" Peter cried angrily. "Have sense, Sandra! It would be suicidal. Don't you appreciate the danger we'd run?"

"Yes, that's why I wanted to come along too," she said quietly.

It was odd, but at that moment Sandra felt a cold hand creep into hers. She felt the pressure of another girl's fingers. Peter might not understand, but June understood. It was odd, too, that a lifelong friendship should begin at that precise moment.

"You're mad. Stark-raving mad," Peter said through his teeth. "I don't see what else I can do but fly back to Princeville. I'm sick of this circus stunt anyhow."

"But we must get down to that house," Sandra cried. "Peter, we *must*. Look, the flames are beginning to take hold now. Why should they burn the house if there wasn't something—or someone—they didn't want us to find there? Peter, isn't there *anywhere* you could land? Look, over there."

"What do you think I am?" he demanded roughly. "Do you think I can land a plane in a space as large as a woman's pocket handkerchief? The best we could hope for would be to land on our nose in those bushes."

"Then try it, Peter!"

That was Sandra's voice again, but he didn't pay any attention to her. He half turned toward June. "What do you say, June? Do *you* want me to risk it?"

She hesitated, then she said breathlessly: "Yes . . . yes . . . if you think there is any possibility of making a safe landing, Peter."

"All right." He spoke curtly. "You girls had better hang on by the skin of your teeth though. We'll probably land with a mighty wallop. Be prepared to jump out the moment we hit ground in case the plane catches fire. Here goes. I'm a fool to do this, the damndest fool."

As he spoke he turned the nose of the plane

down, banked, and pancaked down into the narrow clearing. He was right when he had said there was no room; the plane overran the cleared space and headed straight into the scrub. There were terrifying seconds as it tore up small trees, lurched, and plunged madly. Then its nose went down and it ended its career with a sickening crash. None of the three ever quite remembered what happened immediately after that. June found herself stupidly calling Peter's name and with her hands under his armpits trying to drag him out of the wreckage. He wasn't conscious, and blood was coming from a gash on his forehead.

"It was my fault. It was all my fault." She was sobbing. "I shouldn't have let you do it. Oh, Peter, Peter, if you should die . . ."

"I don't think he's going to die," Sandra said practically.

Of the three she seemed the least shaken. All she had suffered was a momentary sense of shock. "I think he is only stunned. I've felt his heart, and it's beating all right. Hadn't we better go down to the fire and see if Ashley—"

"Ashley, Ashley, Ashley! Don't talk to me of Ashley!" June was half sobbing, half shrieking it. "Everything has always been Ashley in my life, Ashley first, Ashley last, and now I've killed Peter because of him! I know I've killed him! I'm sick of Ashley. I've done so much for him; I've sacrificed so much for him, and now I've

killed or nearly killed the only man who has ever loved *me* because of him! You go down and find Ashley—for heaven's sake, go—but leave me with Peter. Do you think I'd go anywhere and leave Peter now?"

Sandra looked at her. "All right," she said. She turned and ran through the scrub.

Chapter 24

ASHLEY didn't find his captivity too unpleasant. At least not the first few hours of it. They had bound his legs and his arms, but he had free play with his hands, and when his own cigarettes ran out the native guard obligingly gave him some vile-smelling tobacco and a few pieces of cigarette paper and allowed him to roll his own. The guard was large and black and armed with a rifle, but Ashley's experience of the natives was that the larger they were often the less courage they had.

Ashley learned that this man's name was Georges Carpentier Lestrangle, which made it unnecessary for Ashley to inquire his age. Ashley found him not unwilling to talk, but on the subject of setting him free, even for a large consideration, the man was particularly obtuse.

"Either those devils have put the fear of God

into these fellows or they're being damned well paid," Ashley decided.

How he came to be in this unenviable and unromantic position of half lying, half sitting on one of the rotting upper floors of the old mansion, his back propped against the wall under one of the windows, his legs and arms bound, was a long and not very edifying story. He cursed himself that he had been fool enough to have been caught; on the other hand, if he hadn't been caught he didn't see how he could have got the information he wanted, though it was a debatable point whether that information would ever be imparted to the right quarters now.

That he had caught the German minister, Herr Schmidt, directing and organizing supplies for a German raider in a neutral country red-handed, that if this information, with the proof, were laid before the President, even that corrupt old politician would have to act, and act decisively, was worth any sacrifice on Ashley's part. Even the sacrifice of his life. On the other hand, he did not take kindly to the idea of sacrificing his life and letting the villains of the piece get off scot-free to continue their nefarious work. Lying there, with the sunlight shrinking in an ever smaller pool at his feet, smoking those awful-smelling cigarettes, he wondered why they had not killed him at once. Surely here in this isolated rotting manor house was a more convenient spot for putting a bullet through him

than had been an open car in Princeville. He could only conclude that they had not wanted to kill him before the natives. Possibly they, the natives, did not realize the seriousness or the lawlessness of the work they were doing; besides, a white corpse, even in Karpeti, was difficult to dispose of.

The natives had seen him taken prisoner—after all, it had been five to one—but they had been told that he was merely a common thief and that the masters would deal with him “presently.” Ashley couldn’t get away from the fact that that “presently” had sounded ominous. He suspected what they meant was that two of them would return after dark, take him away in a car, and that was the last anyone would hear or see of Ashley Wood, except perhaps the little fishes. In the meantime, until it was sufficiently dark, he had been left bound with this big native to guard him. The Germans, he suspected, had gone off with their cargo of stores for a rendezvous with the captain of the raider.

As the shadows lengthened Ashley found himself ruminating upon his past life, not with any great satisfaction. He was forced to the conclusion he had not led a very wise and certainly not a noble life. That he had to the utmost of his ability, as testified to by the astute gentlemen of Whitehall, tried to serve his country in this remote, tropical island was all he could hope to claim on the credit side when brought up before

his Maker. On the other hand, he might have some very black marks against him and he felt very sorry about these, for he knew they would have to do with women. He felt particularly sorry because of June. She was such a game, courageous little soul. He wished he had loved her.

And then he found himself thinking of Sandra, thinking how absurd she was, how dear she was, and wondering what had possessed him to fall in love with her. Of all the women he had known and liked, she was the very one he shouldn't have fallen in love with, the daughter of a millionaire, even a millionairess in her own right, almost too beautiful to be true, essentially lovable but almost completely devoid of humor. She didn't know the first thing about him, and if she did she would be horrified. He said that over and over again to himself. "If she knew me as I am she'd hate me." But he wished he could have seen her just once again. He'd like to have said several things to her. He'd like to have said, for instance, that a sense of humor wasn't really essential—well, that he loved her anyhow. He wondered if she would eventually marry Slade, and he felt quite savage at the thought. But Slade, on the other hand, might marry June. He had a shrewd suspicion that Slade had recently become very attached to June. Ashley sensed things like that. "I'm awfully good at everyone's love affairs but my own," he thought bitterly.

Well, if June married Slade it would be a good thing for her. Far, far better than marrying him. Poor little June, waiting for him to marry her. He wouldn't have let her down for anything, but this was something he hadn't bargained for. He stirred and realized that his feet were becoming unpleasantly cramped. The pool of sunlight was dwindling. You could have put it on a six-pence now. He straightened himself as much as he was able to and said to the guard:

"You'd better decide to let me go, Georges Carpentier. I have friends coming for me. Very strong, powerful friends. If you don't let me go they'll kill you."

The native bared his white teeth in a grin. "You have no friends coming. How they come? How they find their way here?"

"Oh, they're coming all right," Ashley assured him confidently. "They're coming in a big plane with silver wings. They're bringing guns with them, machine guns, and when they come that will be the last of all of you."

"You are a big damn liar," the native said and spat.

But Ashley thought he looked slightly discomforted. All the islanders, he knew, were secretly terrified of airplanes. They considered them supernatural inventions of the devil.

"Oh no, I'm not," he said, rolling another cigarette. "You'd be wise to take that money I promised you when I get back to Princeville."

You'd enjoy spending it. You won't enjoy much of anything after you're dead."

"I have good pay now. Very good pay," the native said. "And you have no friends, and they have no airplane. You are—" But before he could repeat the words, "a big damn liar," they both heard distinctly the drone of an airplane engine overhead.

Ashley had no notion that the plane was Peter's, but he determined to take full advantage of the moment. "There they are now," he said with apparent confidence. "They're coming for me, just as I told you. You'd better cut these bonds and let me go quickly or, as I said, it will be much the worse for you."

"I do not believe you," the guard said, but he was fidgeting with his rifle and listening to the drone of the plane intently.

Ashley maneuvered himself into a position where he could just see through the window, and as once again the silver plane circled overhead he heard himself shout. He shouted with excitement, with joy, with incredible, unbelievable hope. For it was Peter's plane!

"It's them. It *is* them," he shouted. He had no idea how they had located him. The fact remained they had come.

The guard came cautiously over and peered up through the window. Certainly it was a plane. Certainly the plane was circling over the house. And most certainly Ashley had told him

that his friends were coming by plane to rescue him with machine guns. As he stood there hesitating he saw someone lean out and wave a bright-colored scarf.

"There, that's the signal that they're about to land," Ashley said.

The guard didn't wait for any more. He had his orders that if anything unusual occurred to report to one of the other natives who was below in charge of the stores. Leaving Ashley, he rushed down the creaking old staircase, and a few moments later a group of natives were all jabbering together, rushing out to look up at the plane and beginning to show every symptom of panic. The head boy had had his instructions from Herr Schmidt. If there was any danger of imminent discovery the whole place was to be set on fire, and the natives were to scatter. About the tenth time Peter circled over the house, much lower this time, their frightened senses told them the moment had come. Everything was ready in case of such an emergency. A few minutes later the contents of the lower cellars were blazing like a bonfire.

The first intimation Ashley had of what was happening was the sudden, almost suffocating smell of smoke. He knew at once what had happened. He cursed and swore and tore at his bonds. He had no intention, if he could avoid it, of being burned alive like a rat in a trap. But although he strained at the cords until they cut

deep into his flesh he found himself incapable of even loosening them. Somewhere up there in the sky were Peter and June. He had recognized the colored kerchief she waved, bless her. But would they reach him in time? Could they land anywhere? He hadn't heard the plane for some little time now. Perhaps they had gone back to Princeville.

He felt cold at the thought despite the increasing heat about him. He tried hurtling his body about the floor in a vain endeavor to get some part of him free. He could not only feel the heat of the flames below, but he could hear the old timbers spluttering as the flames attacked them. And then when he had exhausted himself almost to a point of unconsciousness, when the smoke had become suffocating and the crackle of the flames as they bit into the timbers was like the roar of an angry crowd gathering force each moment, he had the strangest hallucination—for it seemed to him it must be a hallucination. It couldn't be Sandra standing there and coughing violently at the same time. Not Sandra, he thought weakly, an angel more likely. An angel with two heavy plaits of fair hair that had become uncoiled and hung over her shoulders, an angel with cheeks fiery from the heat through which she had fought her way, an angel with red blistered hands.

"Is there anything I can cut these cords with?" she was demanding.

"Then this isn't heaven," he said and grinned at her.

"I'll have to carry you," she said.

That startled him, even in these circumstances. "Carry *me*?"

"Oh, that's comparatively easy. Or it will be if the staircase holds."

"But how on earth could you carry *me*?"

"The fireman's grip. A child can carry a grown man. I took advanced first aid at college."

"Oh lord," he groaned, "you would have taken first aid at college!"

But even the indignity of being slung around a lovely young girl's back was better than being burned to death, he decided.

Perhaps Sandra's first-aid course had not been so efficient; anyhow, she was both winded and exhausted by the time she finally managed to get Ashley out of the burning house to safety. She planked him down at the first convenient spot and sank down beside him.

"I'm sure I should be grateful to you for saving my life," he remarked presently. "But at the moment I'm too irritated because you've put me down on some damn prickly bush."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't say you're sorry like that! For heaven's sake, do something about cutting these wretched cords."

She got to her feet. "I'll try and find a sharp stone."

A few minutes later she was back with one, and while she bent over him, sawing at the cords, he asked: "Where are the others? Don't tell me you were alone in that plane."

"No. Peter was knocked unconscious when we landed. June stayed with him."

"Oh, June stayed with him, did she?" he said and digested that.

A short while later she had him free. From where they stood they could see the flames, bright and savage now, enveloping the frame structure of the old house.

He said soberly: "I might have been in there burning to death, but for you, Sandra."

"Yes. You must admit I did save your life."

"It's the dumbest thing you've ever done," he said. But he took her in his arms and kissed her because he couldn't help himself.

Chapter 25

WHEN Ashley returned to the remains of the wrecked plane Peter was conscious. June was supporting him, and his dark head was resting against her shoulder.

Ashley stood looking down at them, and his face slipped sideways in that attractive grin. "I take it our wedding's off, darling," he said to June.

Her face went crimson and she stammered: "Yes, I think it is, Ashley."

"Well, good luck," he said. He stretched out a hand, and then she saw that his wrists were bleeding.

"You're hurt," she cried.

"Nothing," he said. "It was worth it, anyhow, to have been rescued by a beautiful blonde."

"Sandra did rescue you?"

"She slung me across her back as though I were a two-year-old. I never felt so humiliated." He laughed. "Come along. She's bringing my car down to the road. I'm afraid she'll have to drive. My hands aren't in any fit state, and your young friend Slade doesn't look as though he would be up to driving either. Whoever said men were tougher than women?"

The drive back took them the better part of twenty-four hours. Luckily they found an inn of sorts where they got some food and spent the night. It was a very weary quartet who finally drove up before Redcliffe's porch. Felicité ran toward the car. She looked really concerned.

"Oh, we 'ave been so worried, your papa and me," she cried to Sandra. "We look for you last night. We look for you all this morning and afternoon. Sir 'Ugo, 'e has been 'ere many times. 'E 'as the big worry."

"He'll have a bigger worry when I unload my packet of trouble on him," Ashley said grimly.

"He'll have to stir his stumps to some purpose for the first time in his ministerial career." He turned toward the others. "If you'll kindly unload, I'll go round and see him now. It's pretty urgent."

"But will you not come in and 'ave something to eat and drink?" Felicité suggested. She turned toward Sandra. "Your papa, 'e lie down with the 'eadache, but 'e will get up when 'e 'ear you are 'ome." She looked from June to Ashley and asked expectantly: "There is to be no marriage?"

"You're wrong, Felicité. There *is* going to be a marriage, and a marriage pretty darn quick," Peter said, his arm going about June's shoulders.

"Oh la la." Felicité gave her shrill birdlike laugh. "So zat is 'ow the landscape is arrange. I congratulate you two. But"—she put her head to one side and smiled mischievously at Ashley—"is eet only one marriage?"

"Only one marriage," Ashley said curtly. "Now if you would all mind getting out, I *must* go round and see Sir Hugo."

Ashley's revelations caused a major scandal in Karpeti, but since scandals, and especially political ones, were Karpeti's daily bread, not more than six ministers were dismissed who bought their way back into power at the next election. Herr Schmidt and entourage were forced to leave Karpeti, and the German raider disappeared from those tropical seas. A letter of con-

gratulations reached Ashley from Whitehall, but it reached him so late that he had almost forgotten the incident by then. Sir Hugo also received a letter of congratulation. He had it framed and hung in his bedroom.

But these pleasant incidents are looking into the future. What happened almost immediately upon their return to Princeville was that Peter booked a passage home for himself and June on the next boat that was sailing. The engagement was to be kept quiet, but it was arranged that they were to be married from Peter's home as soon as they arrived in New York. Peter spoke to his mother by long-distance telephone, and she was sufficiently and pleasurably excited to cancel a lecture tour to be at home to arrange a party for after the ceremony.

There was talk that Sandra might travel on the same boat with them, and this talk reached Ashley's ears. He should have known better than to believe any gossip that was going the rounds of Princeville, but oddly he believed this. It threw him into a furious rage with himself and Sandra and the world in general. But at the same time he told himself at least once every hour it was the best thing that could happen. Certainly he was going to do nothing to prevent it. In order to insure that he did nothing, he religiously kept away from Redcliffe's house.

Sir Hugo relieved June from her duties the week before she sailed in order to give her time

to get her things ready. Miss Williams, the bank manager's daughter, promised to fill in temporarily while Sir Hugo looked about for someone permanent.

The day before she was to sail June came into the embassy. Ashley flattered himself he was working, though what he was doing was staring moodily through the window and wishing like anything the Foreign Office would relieve him of his duties here so that he could get back to England and do some fighting.

"Hello, darling," he said. "You look too beautiful to be real."

June did look lovely in a new pale blue linen suit with a soft mauve kerchief. There was color in her cheeks and happiness in her eyes.

"Well," he went on, as she didn't speak, "the future Mrs. Peter Slade of New York and South Carolina should look beautiful. Will you think of me, sweetheart, when you're eating off golden plates and trying to remember if the second footman is really the second footman or just another guest?"

"I'll always remember you," she said.

"Bless you." He took her hand and held it quietly in his for a few moments. Then with a half-embarrassed twitch of his lips that passed for a smile he dropped her hand and walked over to the window.

"I hear that Sandra's going on the same boat as you are," he said.

She didn't reply at once. She said guardedly: "Oh, so you heard that?"

"Yes. One hears everything here. But it's the best thing she could do."

"She might stay here and marry you if you asked her."

He swung toward her sharply. "What rot! It would be the worst thing that could happen. It wouldn't work out. You know darned well it wouldn't work out, June."

"I don't see why not."

"Have you gone balmy, my angel? You must see what two very different people we are."

"Oh, you're not so different," she said, smiling at him. "You are both equally absurd. Sandra seems absurd because she knows her own mind and goes about getting what she wants in the most direct way. You're absurd because you won't allow yourself to know your own mind, and even when you have a suspicion of what your own mind is you rush off at a tangent. Sandra hasn't much humor, I admit, but you've got so much it makes you faintly unbalanced. I should think you'd be very good for each other."

"You're mad yourself," he said angrily. "And don't talk to me like that again."

He said he wouldn't come down to the boat and see them off, but he came. He told himself he came because people wouldn't expect him to. They'd expect him to be nursing a sore head

because June, his ex-fiancée, was going off with the rich young Peter Slade. It had nothing to do with Sandra sailing on the same boat and his wish to say good-by to her.

The sun was shining fiercely that morning, and the boat seemed to be floating in a pool of sheer gold. The decks were crowded. The sailing of any ship was an event in Karpeti, and people came on board whether they had friends traveling or not. Everyone knew Ashley, and a number spoke to him, but he merely answered shortly and made his way to the group surrounding June and Peter.

Old Redcliffe was there, being extraordinarily hearty and fanning himself with his Panama hat. Felicité, her hand through his arm, looked possessive and discreet. She was wearing a well-cut black suit, and already she was being careful about whom she bowed to. June looked really lovely in a cool white linen frock, with a belt of scarlet. Peter, who didn't seem capable of letting go of her hand for one instant, still looked pale, but it didn't hurt his dark good looks. They looked an extraordinarily happy pair. Ashley grinned wryly to himself and thought: "That's one in the eye for you, old man."

Sandra was there, though Ashley did his best to avoid looking at her. But one glance was sufficient to tell him that she had never looked more beautiful, more tantalizing, or more desirable. She was bareheaded. The heavy coils of hair

were pure gold that morning, and the large eyes were bluer even than the sea. She had on a cream-colored tussah suit and she looked superb. He was so conscious of her he had no notion of what he was saying. Afterward he went quite cold to think of the things he may have said.

Presently the boy came round calling: "All visitors ashore, please." And he nerved himself to go and say good-by to Sandra.

He had just begun, stammering and even not managing his grin very creditably, when she said calmly: "Oh, but you're mistaken, Ashley. I'm not going. Did you think I was?"

His chief emotion was such overwhelming relief he didn't even answer her. He wanted to shout and throw his arms about her and hug her, but at last he managed to say weakly: "Aren't you? I heard you were."

"You've been misinformed then," she said. "As a matter of fact, I am taking a position here."

"You are taking a position here?"

"Yes. You see, it is necessary for me to work for my living now. Since I turned over my income to Father I have to find employment. I saw Sir Hugo yesterday afternoon. I am going to take June's place at the embassy."

"You are going to work at the embassy? You are going to type my reports?" He almost shouted it.

"Yes, but don't worry that I won't be effi-

cient. I studied both shorthand and typewriting at college. I thought it necessary against such an eventuality as this."

"Do you mean to say *I* am going to have to look at you every day sitting behind that blasted typewriter at the embassy?"

"There will be no need to look at me too often. You will be getting along with your own work, I hope."

Ashley groaned. At that moment he threw up the sponge.

"You're quite impossible," he said. "And you may be the best shorthand typist in the whole of the United States—and I've no doubt that you are—but you are *not* going to work with me at the embassy. That is something my nerves simply would not stand."

"But I don't see what you're going to do about it," she pointed out seriously. "Sir Hugo has already made the appointment."

"I'll tell you what I'm going to do about it," he said. "I'm going to marry you. It's the lesser of two evils. I'd rather see you at home in the mornings and evenings than have to look at you in the office all day."

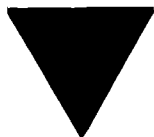
The boy said persistently at their elbows: "All non-passengers ashore, please."

"Oh hell," Ashley said, ignoring him, "I suppose I have to kiss you now."

"Well, it's customary," she said and smiled in such a way that he began to wonder uncom-

fortably if he hadn't been wrong about that sense of humor.

But he kissed her—he kissed her not once, but a number of times, and half of Karpeti saw him kiss her. And that half of Karpeti jumped to the correct conclusion that this time Ashley Wood really would be married.



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